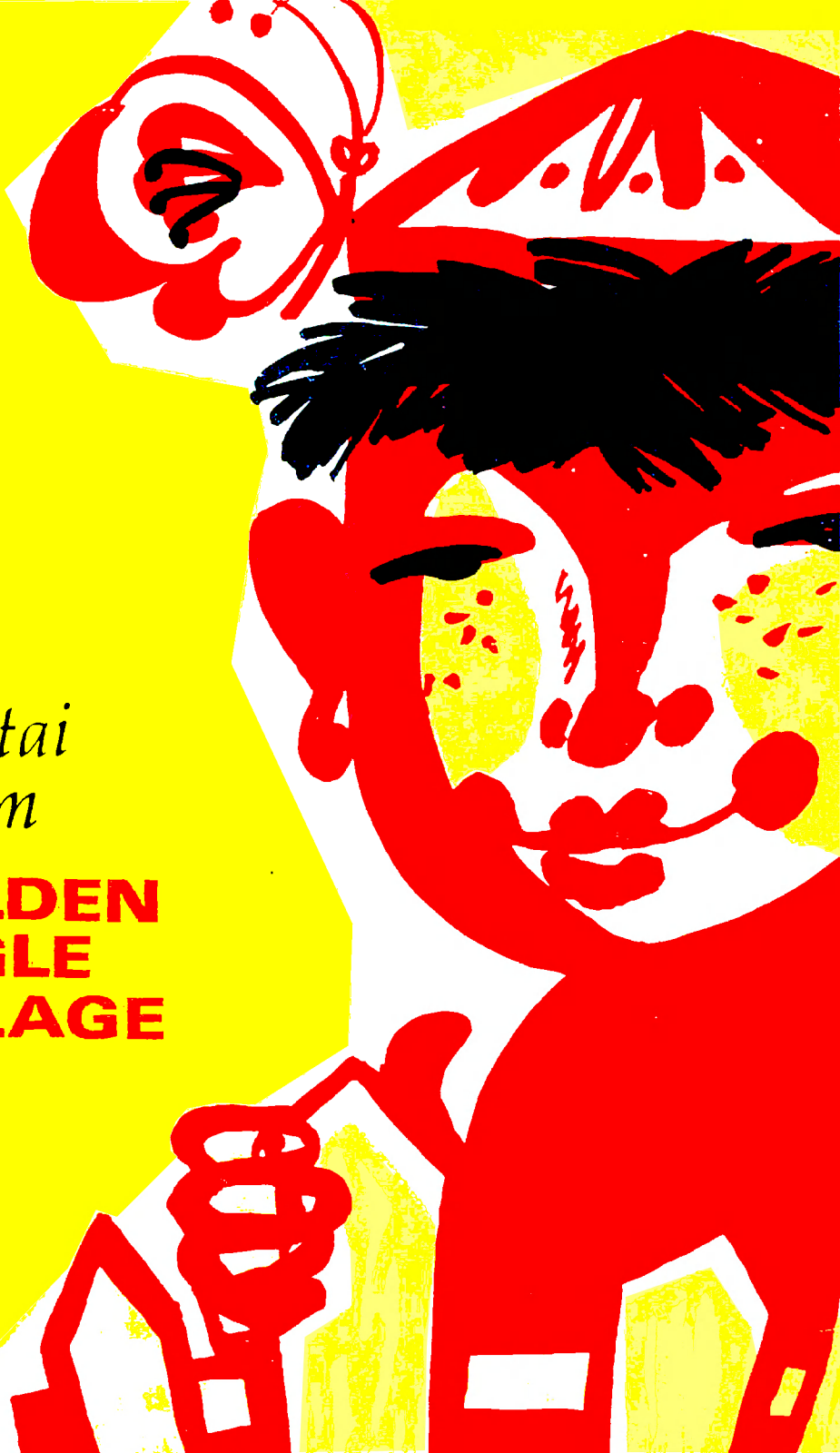
Mustai Karim

GOLDEN EAGLE VILLAGE



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Translated from the Russian by *Tom Botting*
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М. Карим

"ТАГАНОК"

Повесть

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MUSTAI KARIM AND HIS STORY *GOLDEN EAGLE VILLAGE*

FOREWORD

So you, young English, or, perhaps, English-speaking reader, have picked up this book which is new to you. What kind of a book is it? What is it about and who wrote it?

I myself like to read children's books, although I am no longer a child, and I sometimes even write for children. But the point really is that a good children's book is read not only by the young one, but also by his mother and father and by his grandmother and grandfather, too, who once upon a time were also children. Good people always have something of the child in them. But bad children are worse than bad grown-ups. Do you know why? It is because, as they grow up, what is bad within them becomes even worse; worse for everybody around them and sometimes even more than that, worse for whole nations and countries....

The story Golden Eagle Village *is about good children. Although they are sometimes mischievous and naughty and do silly things, still they are good children, about the same age as you are, only living in another country and in different surroundings.*

That is why I decided to tell you something about this book and about the man who wrote it.

In our country we publish very many books for children. Some of our writers have dedicated all their skill to children. Readers of many generations love and appreciate them. But "grown-ups" writers, understanding perfectly well that childhood is life's beginning, also write books for the young, and sometimes they turn out even better than those written by "children's" writers.

Mustai Karim is a "grown-ups" writer, a poet, dramatist and a journalist who is well known and well loved by Soviet readers. He is the winner of the USSR and the RSFSR State Prizes. Moreover, for a long time he has been a member of the parliament, the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation.

You probably have heard that in our country there live more than one hundred nations and national groups. Each one of them speaks and studies its own language. Each of these nationalities, big and small, has its own writers. Here each reader, child or grown-up, has books, and favourite books at that, which were written in different languages and then translated into his own native tongue.

Mustai Karim writes his poetry, his plays, articles and books for children in his own native tongue, which is the Bashkir language. He is a Bashkir poet, a people's poet of Soviet Bashkiria, a republic in the Ural steppes. If you know where the rivers Volga, Kama and Ural are in our country, you can easily find on the map the Bashkir Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic.... And if you do not know where those rivers are, you just look them up in an atlas.

In our country not only Bashkirs know Mustai Karim. So do Russians, Uzbeks, Ukrainians, Kazakhs, Byelorussians, Lithuanians, Moldavians, Kirghiz, Yakuts, Estonians, Tatars, Buryats, Letts and people of many more nationalities and languages far too numerous to mention here.

Mustai Karim is known by grown-ups, yesterday's children, and by children, tomorrow's grown-ups. They know him because his books are published in all the languages of the peoples of our country, the Russian editions being the biggest of all.

Now just a few words about Mustai Karim as a children's writer. To be a real writer of children's books, it seems to me, one should not only possess imagination, kindness and brain but should also have experience in life, be it sad or merry, hard or easy. Then you go through life, knowing that you live not for yourself, but for others, knowing that you are doing good, however little, good for someone other than yourself.

I believe that Mustai Karim has always lived according to this principle. That is why people in the Soviet Union love his verses so much, that is why they love his plays, that is why our children love

him, children of all nationalities. Such a person not only writes with talent, he also writes about what he himself has lived through....

Of course you have heard about the last war. It is called the Second World War. For you it is history. For Mustai Karim, it is his own life experience. He lived through those four long years of bitter fighting together with millions of Soviet people who went through the war and won victory over fascism. More than once he was wounded, more than once he suffered from shell-shock. In 1945, the year of victory, he took part in liberating the peoples of other lands from the fascist yoke. His very first book for children The Shoes *was about that. Later came his story for children* The Happiness of Our Home, *about the difficult years after the war that the boys and girls of our country went through, children of the country that had been victorious, but laid waste by the enemy.*

The story Golden Eagle Village *is also about those hard times. It is about the childhood of a group of Soviet boys, Bashkir boys, who had known the misfortunes of war, but who are now living through the even more complicated time of post-war devastation.*

When you read Golden Eagle Village *you will learn about children of your own age living in the Soviet Union during the post-war years that were so difficult for us. You will learn a lot you may need some day, because you never can tell what trials you may have to face in the future.*

Mustai Karim's story Golden Eagle Village *came out in our country a long time ago, in 1960. Since then it has been published and reprinted in the many languages of the Soviet Union.*

Our children, growing up after the war and in the hard post-war years, love the story Golden Eagle Village *for its honesty, its truth, in a word, because in it the author speaks with the children seriously, as he would to grown-ups and not, as sometimes happens in children's books, in baby-talk.*

When my old friend and front-line comrade Mustai Karim learnt that I was going to write a foreword to the English edition of Golden Eagle Village, *he asked me to include a few of his thoughts. I am doing so in full. Here they are:*

"On an August night I look at the sky above me. It is my Bashkir, my Russian, my Soviet sky. I see in it my own life and the life of Vazir and the other characters of Golden Eagle Village. *By the*

way, Vazir is not an imaginary character. I just changed his and the other boys' names. But what's in a name? For me they are the same people who at that time were boys, and of whom, since I know their lives now that they have grown up, I am proud, very proud....

"But to get back to Golden Eagle Village, *or perhaps to my books for children, those already written and those still unwritten. I think that the troubles of children are not mere trifles, the troubles of the little ones should also trouble grown-ups. Children have their own sorrows, they suffer their losses and these should be respected. They should be taken seriously. Otherwise a good little person might grow up to be a cynic.*

"The book Golden Eagle Village *came into being in this way: after the war all my family, my wife Rauza, our little son Ilzig and myself, were living in a village beyond the Ural River. That is where everything happened. That is where I got to know Vazir and the other lads. That is what the story* Golden Eagle Village *and other books are all about...."*

It is difficult for me to add anything to those words written by the author.

I just want to say that I hope the young readers in other countries will learn from this book something about the life of Soviet children of their own age. It is always interesting to learn about other people. For example, in our country books for children by authors in Britain, America, France and the Scandinavian countries, Africa and Asia are published in all the languages of the peoples of the Soviet Union. Extracts from them are included in primers and school-books. So Soviet boys and girls have an opportunity to learn about unknown peoples and places and to decide which books they like best, or "what is good and what is bad" as our poet Vladimir Mayakovsky wrote, who was also the author of numerous books for children.

Sergei Baruzdin

GOLDEN EAGLE VILLAGE

Have you ever been in Golden Eagle Village? You haven't? How do you get along without seeing one of the prettiest villages in the world? Your bad luck, of course.... Still, there are folk who not only have seen that village, but were born and grew up there.... They're the really lucky ones, they are! Just imagine, as soon as they're born they find Golden Eagle Village at hand! Yet there's no understanding some people. There are strange folk, even among the people of our village, who willingly dash off over the hills and far away to towns and countries you've never even heard of before. Off they go and have a good look at everything. Then back they come to the village where they were born and tell a lot of weird and wonderful stories. I'm not talking about the war. Lots of our people went to the war, but they weren't looking for

something interesting to see. When there's a war you don't think about that kind of thing. But in peacetime even the old men, who can't go flying off to all corners of the world like young eagles, are always dreaming about far-off lands where oranges and lemons grow, about deep blue seas and oceans, about lands where winter never comes and places where the nights are long and as bright as day.

Lots of folk have daydreams. "Oh, how I'd like to see all those things with my very own eyes!" they sigh. But somehow I've never met a single one who cried: "Oh, how I'd like to go to visit Golden Eagle Village!"

It's simply amazing how people can be so incurious and indifferent. Makes you feel sorry for them.

As I said, in Golden Eagle Village there are plenty of people who have travelled and seen the world. There are others who never went anywhere and yet are not so simple as you might think. They can tell black from white. Take Sharifulla-agai, our shepherd, for example—by the way, the *agai* bit means "elder". Well, Sharifulla never left the village for a single day, yet he knows the whole globe like the palm of his hand. You ought to hear the tales he tells!

According to him red paint is made out of the waters of the Red Sea, black paint comes from the Black Sea, the white stuff comes from the White Sea. Farther off there's the Yellow Sea and the Green Sea and the Blue Sea. Whatever colour you want, it's there for the taking. Then again, according to Sharifulla, in the warm parts there are steppelands so flat that if you set an egg rolling at sunrise it will keep on moving until sunset.

That's Sharifulla for you! Never been anywhere, but he knows all there is to know.

Golden Eagle Village is right in the middle of the Ural Mountains. There are mixed woods all around, leaf-bearing trees and pines and fir-trees. On either side of the village there is a big lake. One is called Kalkan-kul, or Shield Lake, the other Kylys-kul, or Sword Lake. In spring, as soon as the mountain slopes are covered with green, the water of Shield Lake becomes as warm as milk fresh from the cow. The water

of Sword Lake, though, is always as cold as ice. Even in the middle of summer if you plunge in your whole body stings with cold.

Of course, nothing happens in this world all by itself and there are all sorts of legends about how these two lakes appeared. Long ago, it would seem, a *batyr*, a mighty warrior, was helping to defend the Urals from foreign invaders, when he was struck by an arrow. The warrior fell to the ground. The sword he held in his right hand flew off in one direction and the shield he held in his left hand flew off in the other. Where the sword fell there appeared the cold lake and where the shield fell the warm lake appeared. If you ask why the water in the two lakes is different Sharifulla will answer immediately:

"It's because the sword is a cruel weapon, made to kill, while the shield is made to protect people."

The two lakes are deep and beautiful, but they are not the only wonderful things about Golden Eagle Village. All around the village high mountains rise right up to the sky, one after another, as if they were running a race. Between the mountains stretch the valleys and meadows, like green velvet into which bright flowers are woven. The pure spring water runs downhill babbling. Mountain goats gambol, leaping from rock to rock. From the springtide, when the rivers are in full flood, until the autumn frosts begin to nip, birds twitter endlessly. During the spring thunderstorms the mountains boom and resound as if they were putting their shoulders against the dark clouds and were splitting the very heavens apart. In the heat of summer cow parsnip in the woods grows as thick as your arm. The ripe and juicy strawberries in the glades are as big as a wood lark's head. High up in the mountains, where the foot of man never trod, the golden eagles bring up their little ones. When they are fully fledged they leave the nest and, with loud screams, soar over the village. Those are the golden eagles that gave their name to our village many long years ago.

A TALK ON MOUNT KUKREK

The high mountain that rises over Sword Lake is called Mount Kukrek. Its northern slopes are covered with pines and firs, while the southern slopes are just wasteland. When it is lit up by the sun the mountain looks like a head, half shaved. In those parts the trees always grow pressed up against the northern slopes, as if they wanted to protect the mountains from the cold northern winds. If you climb to the top of Mount Kukrek and look around you will see how the line of the sky has moved somewhere far, far off, while all the houses

of Tirmeh village, on the bank of the Ural River, look no bigger than hives in a bee-garden. Even the smoke of the fire lit by the shepherds there on the mountain side looks thinner than the smoke curling up from Sharifulla's pipe.

Only Peak Kiramet, on which the snow lies until the hottest summer days, shines dazzlingly white in the sunshine among the other mountains that look like blue waves moving towards it from all sides. The longer you gaze at that white peak the nearer it seems to get, growing before your very eyes, moving all by itself drawn towards man.

Many boys dream of climbing to the top of Mount Kiramet, but you have to climb for a whole day and night, following dangerous winding trails along the edge of precipices. You have to make your way through dense woods and deep ravines. Of course, anybody who considers himself a man will climb to the top of Mount Kiramet, no matter what.

Of course he will climb it....

But for the time being on the southern slopes of Mount Kukrek Sharifulla's sheep are grazing. They nibble and munch the grass, while on the top of the mountain sit five people of different ages. The one with sunken cheeks and ginger moustache, much older than the others, is Sharifulla-agai. You already know him. But you probably have never heard anything about the other four. There's nothing surprising about that, since they have never yet done anything outstanding. Three of them only yesterday finished the fifth form, getting different marks. They just managed to reach the end of the school year and, although they did not always find it easy to learn their lessons, at least they did not have any odd tasks left over to do, moreover, they would not have to take any exams a second time. Each one of the people sitting up there on the mountain top is different and each one has a different name. The skinny little chap with a nose as sharp as a wedge is called Gabdulla. His hair is as black as pitch. You might think that if you touched his hair your fingers would stick to it. That stocky, sturdy boy with his funny little nose and his face as round as a wooden bowl, is Vazir. His plump cheeks are always apple-rosy. Whether it is hot or cold. Vazir

has the habit of always blinking. One day a new teacher thought he was making fun of her and sent him out of the class. But, although Vazir is always winking and blinking, he can shoot straight with a catapult.

The third boy, the only one in Golden Eagle Village with red hair, is Aidar. He is nicknamed the Mountain Goat. That is because he runs so well. The fourth person is a girl and she sits slightly to one side. She is just six. There is a red ribbon plaited into her pigtail — mouse tail be a better word. She has a beautiful name, Gulnur, which in the Bashkir language means "little flower in the sunshine". Everything would be all right, but this girl Gulnur lacks her two front teeth and of course it is very difficult for a person like that to keep her tongue between her teeth.

At present the four of them are holding their breath as they listen to Sharifulla-agai. The warm rays of the setting sun play on the tips of Sharifulla's tobacco-stained moustache, and gleam on his lower lip, so that every word quietly pronounced by Sharifulla-agai seems to open up for the children some thrilling secret known to no other.

What is he telling them? Let us listen.

"To climb to the peak of Kiramet means to climb up to where the eagles soar," Sharifulla declares. "At night, way up there, the stars swoop and dive, and play like moths round a bonfire. They fly very low. You could put out your hand and catch them! Some of them, the most daring ones, at times accidentally hit the rocks and get smashed to bits. Those are what we call shooting stars. Kiramet is a wonderful mountain! However it has one great sorrow. In olden times in the little lake at its very top, there used to be lots and lots of little golden and silver fish. Maybe the stars flew down to the mountain top just to play with them. But the fish were done away with a long time ago. There is not one left in the lake. Still the stars cannot give up their old habit. An evil man finished off those little fish. He just threw one single pike into the lake. Within seven days and seven nights it had devoured all the little golden and silver fish. This made Kiramet very sad. Its sorrow started to make the lake dry up. If the lake

does dry right up, then Peak Kiramet will be completely blind. It will not be able to see the clouds that float above it, or the sunshine, or the stars that gambol around the peak at night. The greedy pike itself died in the end, but it died after eating up every living thing in the lake. If no brave *djigits,** no fine lads come to put some golden and silver fish back into the lake, then it will dry right up and Kiramet, in its grief, will tumble down. Yes, if one day, where we now see that high mountain shining white as white can be, if we see nothing but ruins, it will be very, very sad.... Don't you agree, little brothers?" asked Sharifulla.

The "little brothers" made no reply.

* *Djigit* (Bashkir)—dashing and skilful horseman, a fine fellow.— *Tr.*

CHOOSING A CHIEF

When the setting sun touched the far-away woods Sharifulla drove his sheep down towards the farm and the children walked home.

The first to speak was Vazir:

"Yes, Kiramet is in a bad way...."

"And all because of one dirty old pike!" Aidar put in angrily.

"It wasn't because of a pike. It was because of that bad man," Gabdulla corrected him and, shaking his head, added firmly, "No, we simply can't leave Kiramet in such a bad way!"

"Let's collect a huge amount of fish eggs," Vazir suggested. "We could take the lot up to the lake. Fish come from those eggs."

"It isn't eggs, but live fish we should put in the lake," Aidar interrupted suddenly.

"They sell red caviar in the shop," Gulnur stated unexpectedly.

The boys exchanged glances. They all realised that when the conversation is so serious there should be no unnecessary ears around.

"Go on, you, push off!" Aidar sternly ordered his sister. But Gulnur had no intention of "pushing off".

"I shan't go anywhere. You push off!"

"Shove off, I tell you. Get going!"

"Get going yourself!"

"All right," Aidar said, dropping his stern tone. "I promise that if you listen to me I'll catch a baby skylark for you. Even two."

"Word of honour?"

"Word of honour!"

With a flick of her pigtail that showed she agreed, Gulnur went skipping rapidly towards the village. Her dress of many colours was soon just a bright spot far away. Then it disappeared.

Where we live men never remain standing when they are talking of serious things. They exchange words of wisdom sitting down. So the boys sat down on the green grass in order to exchange words of wisdom. Peak Kiramet had to be saved, there was no doubt about that. But each of the lads had his own ideas as to how to go about it. Aidar said it would be best to go straight to the collective farm fishermen's team for help. Vazir was enraged and at once started to tease:

"Help, help him! Go yelling through the whole village asking for help. Poor little thing!" He spat on the ground and turned away scornfully. Aidar was about to grab hold of Vazir when Gabdulla put a stop to that, saying sternly:

"This is no time to quarrel. First of all let's swear that none of us, neither awake or asleep, will ever betray what we decide here. It must be a secret. Let them hang us, let them cut us into a thousand pieces, but never shall we betray our secret! Let anyone who cannot hold his tongue be called a dirty two-timer. Now swear!"

Gabdulla himself was the first to place both hands on his forehead, saying solemnly:

"I swear!"

"I swear! I swear!" Aidar and Vazir repeated after him.

"Now what we have got to do," said Gabdulla, "is to catch a whole bucketful of fish about to spawn, or maybe two bucketfuls."

"What are you talking about?" said Vazir jumping up. "Why should we bother catching them ourselves? I know where our fishermen keep their fish at Sword Lake. As soon as it gets dark I can get you two or even three buckets of fish. Only we'll have to make a wicker fishtrap to keep them in."

"Nothing doing! You can't do a noble deed with dirty hands," Gabdulla said solemnly. He had once heard Sharifulla use those very words, but Vazir was not going to be put down. He gave a scornful laugh. "Listen to him talking big." Screwing up his eyes he pointed a finger at Gabdulla. "Anyone would think that we've chosen him to be our chief...."

"Lads!" said Aidar excitedly, "that's it! We need a chief! What about it?"

Nobody answered. It was a serious matter and had to be thought over. Anyway, it would not be right for a man taking part in a discussion to agree too quickly with an opinion somebody else put forward. They were silent for a long time. Still, Aidar's suggestion had to be thought over. Gabdulla, who knew a lot about elections, said:

"Yes, we ought to choose a chief."

However Vazir, who had so little modesty that it could never be seen, started winking his narrow black eyes and began in a plaintive voice:

"Lads, I say, lads, I've never been a chief in my life. You, Aidar, were the head boy in our class. And you, Gabdulla, were chosen the editor of our wall newspaper. You went to the regional rally.... I was the only one...." At this point Vazir's voice began to tremble and tears welled up in his eyes. With a voice as cold as the wind from the mountains Gabdulla cut him short:

"Nobody begs to be a chief." For a second Vazir kept quiet, but his desire to become a leader was too much for him. So he tried a new approach:

"Let's draw lots. Or let's hold a stick each putting his fist above another's. The one whose fist happens to come out on top will be our chief."

"You only do things like that when you're playing games," Aidar said, "and this is no game. I think we ought to run a race. The winner will be the chief."

However Vazir was no good at running. He was a good shot with the catapult. Feeling that he was the best of the bunch at least in this, he gave a false little laugh:

"What will you think of next? Because you can run you must be chief? Chief—that means the Head. What has it to do with the legs, I ask you? And if you can't answer, shut up! The best thing is to have a shooting match. Let the best shot be the commander. Let Gabdulla say what he thinks about that." As a matter of fact Gabdulla very much wanted to make a suggestion of his own, but without hurrying he asked:

"Do you want me to tell you what would really be the right thing?"

"All right. Tell us."

"The right thing to do would be to have a test of strength, a wrestling match. Let the winner be the leader." It was really no use to argue with him, but argue they did and for a long time, too. It almost looked as if Vazir was heading for trouble when he said: "... The time has long past when the one who had most brute,force became the chief."

In the end justice triumphed. All the suggestions were adopted. First they decided to run a race. The finishing mark was to be a lone pine-tree on the outskirts of the village. Aidar drew a line with a stick and all three, rolling up their trousers, got onto the mark. Vazir called out:

"One, two, three, go!"

Like an arrow shot from a bow Aidar flew into the lead. How he ran! His feet hardly seemed to touch the ground. Only his heels flashed one after the other. Gabdulla was not very far behind him. Vazir fell back at once, like a lazy foal who is not too keen on trotting after its mother. He grumbled to himself:

"That darned carroty top, Aidar. He wouldn't trip even if you chucked rocks at his feet!" And, true enough, Aidar had not the slightest intention to stumble. With Gabdulla trailing

behind, he was the first to reach the finishing point and to throw his arms around the lone pine-tree. Gabdulla came in second, while poor Vazir, having run half the way, suddenly fell to the ground and, lifting up his right foot, began examining it. He seemed to search for a thorn and even to pull it out. Then, having sat still for a while, he limped up to his friends. Aidar laughed:

"Why do you run so hard? You ought to take more care of your feet!"

"I got a splinter in my foot," Vazir said, "so the race doesn't count." The two others took a good look at Vazir's foot. They knew what they were looking for all right, but there was nothing to see, except scratches that had healed long ago. Vazir did not trouble to argue. He had to admit he was beaten. The boys decided not to put off the next stage of the competition and got down to business. The three of them pulled their weapons out of their trouser pockets. The weapons were catapults with which they never parted. They all agreed on the rules for the shooting match. Aidar's embroidered *tyubeteika** was hung on the lowest broken-off branch of the pine. They walked back thirty paces and stuck a stick into the ground. Each chose three smooth, round stones from the handful they always kept in their pockets. The victor was to be the one who hit the cap three times running, not missing once. Aidar was the first to shoot. The stone whistled over the cap. His second shot hit the trunk of the tree with a thud. He decided with his last shot he would rip his own skull-cap to pieces. However, his "bullet went looking for another billet", as the soldiers say. The stone went wide leaving the cap in its place.

The next to shoot was Vazir. For some time he screwed up his eyes and stared at the target. Then, gripping the stone he slowly pulled back the rubber band. At that very moment a mosquito landed on his nose, but Vazir did not even notice it. Aidar did though, and mumbled to himself:

"What a fool that mosquito is! It shouldn't sit on his nose. It

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* *Tyubeteika*—an Oriental skull-cap.—*Tr.*

ought to have got right in his eye." Before Aidar had finished his grumbling the cap had dropped to the ground.

"Bull's-eye number one!" Vazir called out triumphantly.

Gabdulla ran to the pine-tree and hung the cap on the branch. Vazir shot again and the whistling stone knocked the cap off the branch. Again it fell to the ground. Something seemed to go "crack" in Aidar's head, just as if the stone had not hit the cap, but his own forehead.

"Bull's-eye number two!" Vazir said proudly. The third shot turned out to be doubtful. The cap fell to the ground, but that was because the wind made the tree sway. And when Vazir even more solemnly declared, "Bull's-eye number three!" Aidar, who was very pleased to tell him he was wrong, said scornfully:

"Hold it! That bullet didn't get its billet!"

"You're jealous, you are! Got the wind up!" laughed Vazir. Although he knew very well he had missed the third time, he could not help teasing the boastful winner of the foot-race. "That's the way to shoot, brother Aidar!" he added, looking important. "Shooting is not running for you. It's not just drumming on the ground with your heels."

"I wonder your tongue doesn't get tired from so much boasting," Gabdulla said with reproach. "Play fair, Vazir. Your third shot doesn't count." Vazir just shrugged. He was sure Gabdulla could not beat him at shooting any more than Aidar could. He was right, too, for Gabdulla hit the cap only once out of three tries. So he took second place.

The sun was already setting and the shadow of the lone pine-tree stretched over the potato field by the time the boys had chosen the place where they were to wrestle. Then they got down to the last round of the competition. After lots were drawn it was Vazir and Aidar who, spitting on the palms of their hands, stood facing each other.

"Shall we fight or be friends?" asked Aidar, just like real wrestlers do.

"We shall fight and then be friends!" Vazir answered, spitting on his hands again.

Just like real wrestlers do at the spring *Sabantuy** the boys pushed each other with their shoulders, then, each getting hold of the hem of the other's shirt, they suddenly bent down and seized each other round the waist. They began to move in circles, each trying to throw his opponent so as to keep his shoulder blades pressed to the ground. They struggled for a long time. Both were gasping for breath, but neither would give way. Several times Aidar pushed his head against Vazir's stomach and tried to throw him over his head, but Vazir resisted with all his weight and it seemed to Aidar that his lungs were going to burst and that his heart would pop right out of his mouth. They wrestled for a long time. Not once did they try to trip each other up. No dirty tricks for them! Both boys played fair. Unexpectedly Vazir made a great effort, he hugged Aidar to his chest with all his strength and with a jerk lifted him up. Aidar's bare feet, all covered with old scratches, left the ground and kicked helplessly in the air. But Vazir could not keep to his feet either and fell flat on his back still grasping his rival. At that very moment the tense silence was broken by a ripping sound. Aidar was lying on the ground and in his hands there were two long strips of pale-blue cotton cloth.

At first nobody understood what had happened, but when Vazir got up they saw that all that remained of his shirt was the two sleeves and the collar hanging like a yoke above his sunburnt body all shining with sweat.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Gabdulla, "what a pretty picture you are!" Aidar had hurt his side on a stone when he fell, but he forgot all about the pain and joined Gabdulla in laughing:

"Ha, ha! The Knight in the Tiger's Skin."**

Having no idea what had happened Vazir felt for his shirt so as to wipe the sweat away from his face. But his hands found only his bare stomach. Only then did he realise that the pale-blue strips of cloth in Aidar's hands had been torn from his shirt. He put his fingers up to the remnants of the

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* *Sabantuy* (Bashkir) — festival when the first furrow is ploughed.— *Tr.*

** *The Knight in the Tiger's Skin*—a legendary Georgian hero.— *Tr.*

collar hanging from his neck and looked up, saying with dignity:

"Well, my head's still on my shoulders, so all the rest will turn out all right." Vazir was not the sort of boy who would start crying or begin a fight because of a torn shirt. He didn't pay attention to such trifles. Besides, Vazir had another shirt at home, although even its owner would have difficulty in telling what colour it was, the sunshine had bleached it so completely. But that did not matter.

A chilly twilight began to fall over the valley. The pitch where the wrestling was taking place was trampled flat, but the *batyrs* were still circling round each other, not taking decisive action. Vazir's meaty back was covered with drops of sweat, but there wasn't a sign of dampness on Gabdulla's shirt. They say about people like Gabdulla: "By the time a good steed starts to sweat a poor nag gives up the ghost." He really was like a good steed and at last he had enough of being led round and round by Vazir. Suddenly he bent down and in a flash lifted Vazir with his shoulder and then threw him right over his head. Vazir was taken completely by surprise and flopped to the ground like a sack. The bout finished so unexpectedly that the boys forgot, for a moment, the reason why they had been locked in combat. Aidar was the first to remember.

"The elections are over," he stated. "Our chief will now take over the command." Two pairs of eyes were fixed on Gabdulla. There was no question about it. He had made the best showing. He was the boldest and strongest of the boys. Vazir, who did not know the meaning of spite and never bore a grudge, said:

"You can lead us through fire and water, we, your true companions, will follow!"

Gabdulla was moved and replied:

"Lads, you remember that story about the three friends, one ran like the wind, another was a sharpshooter and the third was a wrestler."

"But there was only one captain."

"You are our chief now. Hurray!" shouted Aidar.

"Hurray!" Vazir joined in so loudly that the mountain side echoed to his cheer.

Gabdulla brushed the dust from his clothes, straightened his belt and, using the tone of voice that a leader should use, issued his first order:

"This detachment, organised to save Kiramet, shall be known as 'The Tripod'. All right?"

"Right you are!" said Vazir. "A tripod has three legs. And there are three of us." Aidar nodded. Having come to this historic decision, the boys set off for home, their arms around each other's necks.

The Tripod seemed unshakeable and its three supports felt themselves linked forever by the oath of friendship and loyalty they had sworn.

VAZIR'S FIRST MISTAKE

Vazir the sharpshooter was in high spirits. He walked arm in arm with the new captain and thought that since he had lived for twelve years as a rank-and-file person, he could continue in the same way. Not everyone can be a chief and it was enough for him to have become one of the three unfailing supports of the Tripod. Without him the Tripod would topple over, as sure as eggs are full of meat! So he had become a very important person. Vazir wanted everybody to be happy. He wanted to do something good and noble. He put his hand into his left trouser pocket and touched one of his greatest treasures. His eyes lit up with pleasure.

"I say, you chaps," he burst out, "it is not right for a chief to be unarmed." He pulled out of his pocket a small knife with a bone handle that looked very old. He generously held it out to his chief saying: "Here you are, Gabdulla, take this."

The leader and the runner were taken aback. Their eyes were wide with surprise as they gazed at the knife. It was such a rare and valuable thing.

"Where did you get it from?" asked Gabdulla in a frightened voice.

"Don't ask questions. Take what you're offered," laughed Vazir.

But the leader was in no hurry to take the present. He liked the knife all right. He liked it very much and was about to put out his hand for it when an uneasy thought crept into his mind. Wasn't there some mistake? How had Vazir got hold of such a wonderful thing? Now he came to think about it, the sharpshooter often got his hands on things "accidentally for the purpose".

"Where did you get it from? Tell the truth. Otherwise I won't touch your knife," Gabdulla said sternly.

"What's all this about the truth? Take what you are offered."

"No, I won't take it! I'm asking you: where did you get it?"

Vazir was at a loss.

"Where did I get it from? Well, to tell the truth...."

"Yes, the whole truth...."

"Well, really and truly, I eased it out of Sharifulla's pouch." Feeling that he had not said the right thing, Vazir asked uneasily: "What's the matter, don't you like it?"

Gabdulla's eyes flashed with anger. In amazement he exclaimed:

"You pinched it!" Pushing Aidar aside he stepped up to Vazir. "You stole it, you dirty dog!"

"I didn't steal it, I just took it.... Its handle was sticking out of the pouch anyway," Vazir said, trying to justify himself and falling back a little. Gabdulla raised his hand and hit Vazir on the cheek.

"Thief, you thief!" Again he lifted his arm to strike, but Aidar held him back.

"Don't dirty your hands on him!" he said scornfully.

With a bitter sigh the chief pointed at Vazir and issued his second order:

"Vazir is to be expelled from the Tripod for stealing a knife with a bone handle from the shepherd Sharifulla. He is no longer a comrade of ours. We shall not offer him the hand of friendship! We won't talk to him. He's a disgrace!"

"You're a disgrace, you, thief!" Aidar repeated.

Vazir had come down to earth with a bang. His high spirits had evaporated. He bowed his head and watched a dung-beetle slowly clamber out of its hole. It looked around and then unhurriedly crawled away. Vazir felt that the beetle was far better off then he was at the moment. The ragged remnants of his shirt flapped in the wind. Sweat was pouring down his forehead leaving dirty streaks. His eyelids were red and he could not stop blinking. The only thing about him that did not move was the big white button that still fastened the collar round his neck. That button was also the only bright thing about him. Vazir was a pitiful sight, but his companions hardened their hearts against him. The chief's decision remained in force.

In the gathering darkness Vazir listened with bowed head to another stern order issued by Gabdulla:

"Vazir must immediately return the knife to its owner Sharifulla and on bended knee he must beg Sharifulla's pardon. If Vazir does not do this, let the whole village brand him as a thief!"

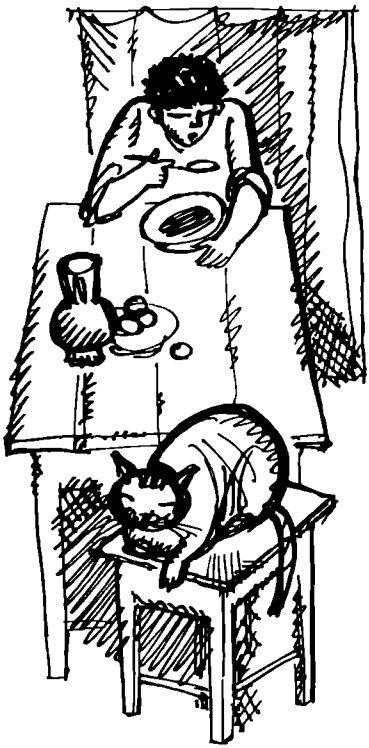
The chief continued mercilessly:

"Vazir is a thief! None of us shall shake his hand. None of us shall speak to him." The two members of the Tripod turned on their heels and walked off home. The third support of the Tripod, the unfortunate Vazir, was left all alone. It was already quite dark, but Vazir stood motionless overwhelmed by his misfortune. The chief's last order, that he should give the knife back to its rightful owner, put Vazir in a very difficult position. If tomorrow was going to be the end of the

world he probably would not have thought of obeying the order, but the world did not look as if it was coming to an end, so, having stood for a little longer, Vazir slowly dragged his feet in the direction of the farm. The shepherd Sharifulla had just finished his work and was on his way home. Vazir saw him and said shyly: "Sharifulla-agai, here is your knife. I found it on the slope of Mount Kukrek...." Vazir did not have the courage to tell the truth and to beg the shepherd's pardon. Sharifulla knew nothing about that, however, and was very pleased to get his knife back.

"That's a good boy! Thank you. You are an honest lad."

There is an old saying: "A word of thanks cures a thousand ills." But neither Sharifulla's praise nor his thanks could make Vazir any the less unhappy at the loss of his comrades.



LIFE AT HOME

Let us drop in to visit the boys at home. With whom shall we begin? Let us begin with the chief. Otherwise he might be offended.

Gabdulla's family consists of three people. His mother is a milkmaid and all the summer she works at the far-away pastures. So Gabdulla remains behind with his grandmother whose name is Nagima. The boy's father had been killed in the war, but the villagers still remember Muhammed the accordion player.

The terrible paper telling of Muhammed's death was delivered two weeks before the end of the war. It said: "He

died like a hero, fighting for his country." Mother and Granny wept for a long time. Their eyes were never dry. Then they became very quiet and sometimes neither of them said a word the livelong day. Although at the time Gabdulla was not yet seven, something deep down in his heart told him what a great misfortune had befallen his family, so he tried not to trouble the grown-ups in their bitter sorrow. Putting an old quilted coat of his father's over his shoulders, he would sit for hours on a stone near the gate.

The spring had been early that year. Even before April was out the green grass had appeared, the birds were singing and the fish leaped as they played in the lakes. Women walking along the street would stop for a moment outside Gabdulla's house and say under their breath: "Poor little chap!" Some of them would wipe a tear away with their sleeves. Gabdulla did not have a clear idea what a father was and why he needed one. Still, a deep sorrow that he hardly understood crept into his heart. Some time later Muhammed's medal "For Valour" arrived. His comrades at the front had sent it. That was more than five years ago and every Thursday Grandmother Nagima would polish it until it shone. Then she would again fasten it in its place below her son's photograph hanging in its frame darkened by time over the chest of drawers.

When Gabdulla came into the house he saw his grandmother sitting and polishing his father's medal. It was Thursday.

"A child without a father is like a horse without a bridle. You no longer do anything I tell you. Where did the imps keep you until dark?" Grandmother Nagima went on angrily. "If only you would be a little bit like Yakup. He's such a good boy. Whenever you look he's never far from home. He eats on time. He drinks what he's given. His clothes are clean. But you do only what you want to. Always following Vazir around. And what a mess you look! O Allah!"

"Granny, it is Vazir who follows me and he would still be following me, if we let him."

Of course Grandmother Nagima had no idea that her grandson, quite an ordinary boy, had become the leader of

the Tripod. If she had known, she probably would have spoken to him in a different tone.

"If only you would take an example from Yakup!" she grumbled.

"Let's leave Yakup out of this, Granny!"

The whole street knew Yakup to be the best, most obedient boy. And, although he was not particularly bright at school he was not anywhere near the bottom of his form, because he studied so hard. At school the teachers, at home all the mothers and grandmothers upbraided the boys, always holding Yakup up as an example. Whenever the lads had been fighting or playing some exciting game, whenever their trousers and shirts were dirty and torn, whenever they came home with bumps and bruises, they always heard one and the same thing: "If only you would take Yakup as an example!"

So it was quite natural for the unfortunate boy to be nicknamed "Yakup the Example". The boys snubbed him and sometimes they would hit him. However, Yakup never raised his hand against anyone. He never quarrelled and he never complained.

Grandmother Nagima rounded out her reproaches fairly soon. A bowl of porridge, now hardly steaming, was waiting for Gabdulla and she was afraid that if she kept on scolding it would get quite cold. She sighed deeply and hung the medal she had polished under the picture of her son.

"Wash your hands properly and sit down."

The electric light over the table shone brightly and the silvery medal gleamed and glinted. Gabdulla did not take his eyes off that medal until he had scraped the last bit of porridge out of the bowl. After all on coming home the chief was met not only with reproaches, but also with a bowl of porridge with butter in it.

Vazir's mother, Kurbanbika, yelled at her son so loudly that the whole street could hear her. You cannot do anything about that, Kurbanbika has such a bad temper. If, for example, her cow is late in returning from the herd she begins to lament for everyone to hear:

"If only the wolves would rip the heart out of that damned cow! I would be so pleased I'd make an offering of alms to Mullah Ejmagol."

If the chicken got into the kitchen-garden all the neighbours could hear the familiar scream: "May they drop down dead! Then I wouldn't have so much to do. I'd get a bit of rest. Shoo! shoo!" But really Kurbanbika would feel lost without her chicken and her cow.

Before entering the house Vazir was careful enough to take off what was left of his shirt. He rolled it up and tucked it under his arm. No sooner had he opened the gate when he heard his mother's shrill wail:

"Vazir, you wicked child! Just you come into the house! I'll give you what for, you horrid boy! I wish you'd break your neck! If I ask you to do anything you're feeling too weak, but when it comes to forever running around with other boys, you're always in the lead. If only you were a bit more like Yakup!"

Many were the threats Vazir had heard during the twelve years of his life, so he was ready for them this time, too. Without a word he marched to meet his fate. However, it should be pointed out that, although his mother had a sharp tongue, she never once hit him. Having hidden the remnants of his shirt behind the trunk in the passage, Vazir went into the living room. His father, Samigulla, was out at work. He had lost a leg in the war and worked as a watchman at the collective farm warehouses.

Vazir's brother, Nasip, three years his junior, was fast asleep leaning against the wall. He looked as if he had his tongue in his cheek. He must have dropped off to sleep before he finished swallowing whatever he had in his mouth.

"What have you done with your shirt, you stupid thing?"

"You see, Mum, I've decided not to wear a shirt this summer. I want to toughen up my muscles."

"A good thrashing is what you really want! Where's that shirt?"

"I left it in the passage. It came apart at the seams a bit."

"All right, you can walk around like that little goose Abdrash. Without your trousers too!"

"Mum, I only want to toughen up my chest...."

His mother's anger was like dry straw. It flared up, but soon burnt itself out. Now her mood suddenly changed.

"Go on, my lamb. Sit down and eat." So Vazir, like the chief Gabdulla, having been lectured on what was right and what was wrong, was looked after and given a good meal.

As for Aidar, nobody paid any attention to him at home. Since there were nine children, nobody noticed the absence of one of them. Going into the summer kitchen, Aidar drank some fermented milk straight out of an earthenware jug. Then unhurriedly he climbed up to the hayloft. He lay down and immediately went to sleep.

As for Vazir, he could not sleep. He went out to the porch and, sitting on the step, gazed at the stars. It seemed to him that the dullest star above Kiramet mountain was his very own star. His thoughts were sad. "Why is it that I am the only one who can't get along in life?" he mused.

Another one who could not get to sleep that night was Gabdulla. The responsibility he had taken upon himself as chief was a heavy burden and he was troubled by all sorts of thoughts. The Tripod had to be set up again, since one of its supports had proven weak. The Tripod needed a new support; but where to find that trusty third comrade? Whom to trust in such an important and serious a matter? Where could he find that support?

THE THIRD SUPPORT

When Gabdulla woke up his grandmother was no longer at home. The boy's gaze came to a halt on the opposite wall where the bright, round medal was hanging. Gabdulla jumped out of bed and was already reaching for the medal, when he remembered that Grandmother Nagima did not allow anybody to handle it. He put down his hand. After all, why should he want to touch it? In any case he could see that it was more beautiful and bigger than even the biggest of the coins the old Bashkir women wear as necklaces. Perhaps he wanted to make sure that he had not forgotten the inscription on its bright silver surface? No, it could not be that. Gabdulla knew the words by heart. Still, he read the inscription in a loud voice, putting special stress on each syllable: "For Valour." "For Valour," he repeated to himself, deeply moved and feeling for the first time the full meaning of those words. Until that day Gabdulla had not paid much attention to the

words inscribed on the silver: "For Valour." So his father had been a brave man! Then why didn't people call him Muhammed-*batyr*, Muhammed the Mighty Warrior? Probably nobody knew about it....

In the stories, if a *batyr* was dying, he would leave his sword, his shield, his bow and quiver of arrows to his son. His father, Gabdulla decided, had probably said: "Give my medal to my son. Let him wear it in memory of me." Most likely that was just what he had said. Otherwise his father's comrades would not have sent the medal to his family.

Gabdulla carefully removed his father's medal from the wall. Then, standing on tiptoe in front of the time-darkened mirror, he pinned it onto his right breast. It seemed to him the medal was very suitable for a captain like himself. From now on he would wear it all the time. He could always get around Granny. She would grumble and mumble until she got tired and left off.

When Gabdulla, the medal shining on his chest, stepped out onto the street he saw his loyal friend Aidar. He had been waiting at the gates for a long time, unable to make up his mind to go in. He was very surprised to see the medal on Gabdulla's shirt and thought: "What's that for? Does he think he can wear his father's medal like a plaything?" However, not wanting to offend his chief, he just grinned: "The medal 'For Valour' should be worn not on the right side but on the left, over your heart."

Without speaking, Gabdulla removed the medal and pinned it on his left breast. He was rather indignant that his friend had not expressed any admiration and did not seem impressed.

"Aidar's a know-all," he thought, annoyed, still the two boys got down to discussing the business in hand.

"To tell the truth Sharifulla-agai was fibbing when he said that Peak Kiramet would tumble down," Aidar said suddenly. "Mountains don't crumble up just like that, unless there's an earthquake!"

"You're doing all the quaking enough to overturn our Tripod!" said Gabdulla angrily. He was already in a bad

temper. Now he felt worse. "What are you scared of, you coward?"

"Who's scared?"

"You are!"

"I'm not scared of anything. You shouldn't get so worked up," Aidar interrupted quietly. "I merely asked my father and he said that there really is a lake on top of Peak Kiramet and that there are no fish in the lake. He also said that a lake without fish is like an eye that is blind. Get it?"

"Get what?"

"What do you mean, what? If we put fish back into the lake everything will be all right. The lake will live again!"

"Is that what you said to your father?"

"Or course I didn't. As if I would tell him!"

Gabdulla was sorry he had insulted his friend.

"You know, Aidar," he said quietly, "even if Peak Kiramet isn't likely to topple down, it still would be a good deed if we fix it so that the lake was chock-full of fish again. Everyone needs fish. But how about catching them? The first thing is to make a wickerwork fishtrap. We'll keep all the fish we catch in it. At the other end of Sword Lake there's a good place among the rushes. The fish bite like anything there."

"I can weave a fish-basket in no time," Aidar said.

The boys decided to go that same day to the other end of Sword Lake and make their basket among the willows there. However they were very much put out that their Tripod lacked its third leg. What a rotter that Vazir was! He'd spoilt everything. They had to find a third support at any cost. Discussing these important matters and grumbling about Vazir, they suddenly noticed Yakup the Example. He was driving geese to the lake with a long switch in his hand. The two boys exchanged glances.

"Hey, Yakup, come here!" Aidar shouted. Yakup stopped.

"I can't. I'm looking after the geese, see?" he called out smiling, but looking a bit uncomfortable.

"The geese know the way. I told you to come here. Do what you're told." Since Yakup was used to doing everything he

was told, he trotted up to the two friends dragging his switch behind him.

"Sit down," the chief ordered. Yakup obeyed. "Do you want to become a *batyr*, a warrior?"

"Of course I do.... Only how do I go about it?" Yakup's eyes were shining. He could not help staring at the medal on Gabdulla's chest. Then he sighed deeply as if to say: "Oh, how happy some people are!"

The chief again looked Yakup over from head to foot with a penetrating glance. Yakup seemed to shrink. He looked very small and helpless. "What do they want to do with me?" he thought nervously. However, he soon found out there was nothing to be afraid of. Gabdulla started to talk to him in a serious and calm voice:

"Yakup, did you ever climb to the top of Mount Kukrek?"

"Of course I did!"

"Did you see Kiramet, the peak shining white, far away?"

"Of course I saw it."

"Well, on the top of that mountain there is a round lake. But in the lake there are no fish."

"What do you mean? There aren't any lakes without fish."

"It seems that there are. Our detachment, called Tripod, have decided to put fish back into it. Want to join us as third man? I'm the chief of the outfit."

At a loss, Yakup stood blinking and even giggled, he was so pleased. The chief repeated his question:

"Are you going to join us?"

"I'll ask Mummy."

"You're a milksop! That's what you are, Yakup! This is a secret and don't you forget it. Even if they hang you, even if they cut you into little bits, you mustn't breathe a word, even to your mum. Got that?" Then Gabdulla explained the task they had taken on clearly and in detail:

"First of all we'll catch ever so many fish to lay their eggs. We'll keep them in a fishtrap, like in a cage. Then we'll carry them up to Peak Kiramet in buckets. We'll have to change the water, but there are lots of springs along the way. If you're scared, say so."

"Won't they bawl at us for that?"

"Who will?"

"Mummy...."

"Of course she will. She'll bawl at you, then she'll forget it. Even in days of old people never did understand those who started out to do something new and important."

As a matter of fact, Yakup himself did not grasp the full importance of the task facing them. He was interested in something else. All the boys had turned away from him and with all his heart he wanted to be on an equal footing with boys of his own age. So, without a second thought, he took the solemn oath to be true to their common cause. Not asking anybody's permission, of his own free will he entered the Tripod. Then the chief put forward another condition:

"Within three days you've got to put an end to all this 'Example' stuff! You must learn how to shoot straight with a catapult, how to climb trees, how to jump and to row a boat well. Those are things you must be able to do. One other thing. Don't you go shaking hands with Vazir," he added sternly.

"Why not?"

"You don't have to know that yet.... Well, do you agree with the conditions? If you do swear!"

"I agree and I swear!" declared the Tripod's new leg.

After a short silence the captain of the Tripod decided he ought to make a final statement:

"Don't go thinking that things have gone so bad that we have to invite you to join us. We just want to make a real man out of you, and don't you forget it!"

"I won't forget," Yakup nodded.

From that moment began all the hustle and bustle of getting ready for their long journey. By common agreement Gabdulla and Aidar were to go to make the fishtrap at the other end of Sword Lake. Yakup was to be left in the village, where he was to put an end to his exemplary conduct. The first of the three days allotted for this task had already begun.

FAME IS NO CAP TO WEAR

Aidar remained in the street, while Gabdulla ran into the house. Grabbing a crisp crust of bread and picking up his grandmother's knife that she kept specially for cutting noodles, he hurried out onto the porch. At that very moment Grandmother Nagima appeared. In a flash Gabdulla hid the knife behind his back. Grandmother did not seem to notice the knife, but she immediately spotted the medal on his chest. She felt a painful twinge in her heart and the wrinkles on her face seemed to grow deeper, while her eyes looked very sad. Yet she did not raise her voice, or rebuke the boy. She put her hand tenderly on his shoulder and said quietly:

"Come into the house with me, lad."

"Granny, I was just going with Aidar to the lake."

"You'll go, all right. But Aidar can wait for you a little while."

Once in the house Nagima again patted her grandson's shoulder.

"The medal looks all right on you."

"Really, Granny?" Gabdulla said happily.

"Your Granny isn't the kind to talk stuff and nonsense. Now you, who have studied for five whole winters, you explain to your Granny what that medal is given for."

"For valour, for heroism!" Gabdulla explained brightly. "That is what is written here, in Russian!"

Granny nodded gently:

"Well, thank you for reading that and explaining it. And to whom do they give those medals, eh?"

"What do you mean? To heroes, to *batyrs*, to brave people."

With a jerk of her chin Grandmother Nagima indicated the medal on the boy's chest. In our parts you do not point with your finger at anything that is looked upon as sacred.

"To whom did they give that medal?"

"You know very well, Granny, that they gave it to my father!" answered her grandson, surprised at her question.

"That being so, who ought to wear it?"

"My father, of course! But father never came back.... So I shall wear it in memory of him."

For a long time Grandmother Nagima was silent. Gabdulla could not make up his mind to go out. Sheepishly he sat down on the plank-bed. His grandmother sighed deeply, lost in thought. Perhaps she was thinking of her son who used to sit there in the same way, dangling his legs. Gabdulla looked like his father. The boy's habits, his reserved smile and his voice all reminded her of her son Muhammed, who had grown up in that house, too. Nagima would often glance at her grandson, at times looking happy and at others, profoundly sad. Gabdulla understood and tried to be particularly gentle with her. This time, too, he understood.

Now the grandmother sighed again and unhurriedly took up the conversation that had been broken off.

"That being so, lad, listen to me.... When a *batyr* dies his sword is passed on to his son. When a fine archer dies his bow and his arrows are passed on to his son.... When necessary sons take up their fathers' weapons. Sons plough their field with their father's plough. They dig the earth with their father's spade and with their father's hammer they forge iron. If a father leaves a cap to his children, they may wear it. Why, you have your father's cap on your head right now! But the renown a father has won and left behind him that is no cap! His children cannot take turns at wearing it. Just as smoke on leaving the chimney no longer heats the house, so the renown remaining after the father cannot pass on to his sons. If your own deeds were worthy of your father, if people admired you for them, it might be another matter...."

"We shall perform such deeds, Granny. You shall see for yourself and you will admire us for them!" Gabdulla declared hotly.

"So be it!" said Grandmother Nagima and added quietly: "If you so wish, wear it and good luck to you.... I mean the medal. I don't forbid you to do so."

Without a word Gabdulla unpinned the medal from his chest and put it back in its place under the portrait.

Aidar, still in the street, whistled shrilly. Even his patience had come to an end.

"Off you go!" the grandmother said. "Only, Gabdulla, don't lose the knife."

At any other time she would not have allowed the boy to take that knife out of the house, but today she said no more to the lad. She probably did not want to reprimand him twice in one day.

"All right, Granny!" Gabdulla called out as he jumped off the porch.

When her grandson had left Nagima took the medal in her hand and looked at it for a long, long time. Then she rubbed it with her cuff and fixed it in its place again.

THE EXAMPLE PUTS THINGS RIGHT

On his way home Yakup spent a long time wondering how to put an end to his "exemplariness" as quickly as possible. What should he begin with? Since his early years he had been used to pondering over every step he was about to make. He always felt as if he were walking over a narrow and rickety bridge and constantly felt he was about to stumble and fall.

Trying to protect her only son, Yakup's mother had brought him up to look on the world around him with timidity and caution. Little Yakup's first encounter with life had been nothing but a lot of "don't"s.

Don't clamber up the fence. Don't throw stones. Don't touch the neighbour's dog. Every minute of the day his mother would din this into his ears and as the boy grew bigger, so did those "forbidden zones". Don't go to the woods

with your friends—you'll get lost. Don't bathe in the lake—you'll be drowned. Don't climb up the mountain—you'll fall down. In summer don't take off your cap—you might get sunstroke. In spring don't take off your warm coat—you might catch cold. There seemed to be no limit to these "don't"s. But there is a limit to everything.

Yakup's mother made sure that he did not pick up the bad habits from bad boys. She was always warning the boy that he should not play with this one, he should not make friends with that one, he should not bring the other home and he should not go to his house, either. Yakup did everything his mother told him. So, little by little, he drew away from the rest of the boys. At first this annoyed them. They jeered at him and sometimes knocked him about. Later they grew tired of that and stopped paying any attention to him, until at last not one of them cared a fig what happened to Yakup. However, all the mothers and grandmothers continued to hold him up to their sons and grandsons as an example. Still the stubborn youngsters had their own way of looking at things and considered it below their dignity to take Yakup as an example.

That was why Yakup was confused and then amazed when Gabdulla and Aidar invited him to join them. For a long time past nobody had needed him for anything at all. Nobody had wanted his company. So when Gubdulla spoke to him in such a quiet and friendly way, Yakup was delighted at the thought that not all the boys of his age had given him up as lost. They were even inviting him to take part in a very important project. He did not know that sometimes one person's misfortune may be another's good luck and that if Vazir had not disgraced himself in such a stupid way he, Yakup, might have remained the Example forever and a day.

Now, however, it was the beginning of the end of the model boy's "exemplariness".

"What shall I start off with? What shall I start with?" he asked himself feverishly, anxious to fulfil the conditions the chief had outlined. The best thing was probably to begin with the catapult. Yes, that was most likely the first important

thing. Every self-respecting boy carried one of those formidable weapons in his pocket.

Yakup hurried home and, taking a knife, went over to the farthest corner of the yard. He chose a dry forked branch, suitable for making a catapult. Next he had to cut it down to the right size and whittle it smooth. With difficulty he pulled the hatchet out of the chopping-block where it was firmly lodged. Then he got down to work. But things did not go smoothly. While he was trying to lop off the end of the branch, he cut off one prong of the fork. So he had to find another branch. This time he was more successful and he finally had the makings of a good catapult. He still had to whittle it smooth and paint it red, like Vazir did. He, Yakup, would not be stingy with the paint, either! He would find an old inner tube from his father's bicycle and cut a long, even strip of rubber from it. Then, from the upper part of an old boot, he would cut a round piece of leather. Of course, he had never made a catapult before, but he had seen how other boys made them. He had even held catapults in his hand. And since others made them, why shouldn't he, Yakup, make one too? Yes, he'd make one all right! The next step would be to gather a pocketful of round pebbles, then, screwing up one eye to take aim, he would take a pot-shot at that cat sleeping so peacefully on the roof of the barn.

Yakup was so deep in pleasant daydreams that, while whittling away at the wood, he cut his thumb. Blood spurted out. He was so frightened that he threw the knife down and screamed loudly for his mother:

"*Esei!*"—that means "Mummy!"

At once he knew he had made a mistake. After all, when any of the other boys cut their hand or foot and saw the blood, they never went running to mother, but sprinkled it with powder made from decayed wood. Yakup saw a log at his feet that suited his purpose. He flicked the blood from his thumb and was about to start to doctor his wound, when his mother rushed out onto the porch.

"What has happened, my darling child, my sweetest heart?" she cried desperately.

However, Yakup was no longer the Yakup who could feel so sorry for himself that he would move his mother to tears of pity. No! He quickly hid his injured thumb behind his back.

"Nothing has happened at all. I wasn't calling you. I just shouted at the cat: '*Besei! Besei!*'" Now *besei*, meaning "cat", of course, sounds like *esei* or "mummy". So Yakup's mother calmed down.

"Oh dear, how you frightened me!" She sighed deeply and went back into the house.

Yakup broke a piece of decayed wood from the log. Having rubbed it into a powder he turned his back to the house, and sprinkled it over the cut. The powdered wood turned a rosy colour, but it stopped the flow of blood. He had to finish the job he had begun, so he bravely took hold of the knife that had caused the trouble, but he did not get any farther ahead. The cut finger began to ache and made work difficult. Soon it was very painful.

Yakup decided to change his plan for overcoming his "exemplariness". Having put his catapult in a suitable hiding-place he began to review the situation.

Even if he couldn't use his hands today, there was nothing wrong with his feet. So he would go right away to the place on Mount Kukrek where outcrops of rock formed sharp ridges. There he would teach himself how to leap from rock to rock. In this way he would fulfil one of the conditions laid down by the chief. Yakup took another look at the house, fearing his mother's all-seeing eye. Then he sauntered over to the gateway. Picking up a ball lying near the fence, he began to play with it, throwing it in the air and bouncing it towards the gate.... As if carried away by the game, he threw the ball into the street and opened the wicket-gate, which squeaked. His mother immediately stuck her head out of the window.

"Yakup, where are you going?"

"My ball bounced out into the street. Look, it's over there, Mummy."

As long as his mother stood at the window he continued to play in the street, throwing his ball at the gate, loudly keeping count of the score. As soon as he heard the window close with

a bang the ball suddenly bounced merrily away down the street in the direction of the mountain. Yakup ran after the ball which rolled on with Yakup following it. He simply couldn't get his hands on it. As soon as he caught up with it, off it would bounce again and go rolling farther along the lane.... Only when it came to the end of the lane did the ball come to a stop in the long grass, but then Yakup was going so fast that he could not stop and kept on running in the direction of Mount Kukrek. Now there was no reason for him to keep looking back. Yakup clambered up on the first ridge. There great grey rocks lay piled one on top the other, each the size of a large trunk, or even bigger.

The boys always chose this place for their war games, hiding behind the rocks and shooting at the enemy. However, it was very dangerous to play there. Just one slip and one could fall and break one's neck. At first Yakup selected the smaller rocks and began jumping from one to another, clumsily waving his arms, trying to keep his balance. He stumbled, hitting his knee painfully and grazing his elbow. But he went on leaping from rock to rock until he became quite skilful. Then he went over to the big rocks.

If anybody from the village had seen Yakup leaping among the ridges, he would have been very surprised for Yakup looked more like a puppet on a string than a boy. But nobody from the village was watching Yakup and it never entered his mother's mind that he could be up to such tricks. Yakup kept on jumping and jumping, clenching his teeth and not giving himself a moment's rest. For him this was no merry game, or a way of letting off steam. It was a pressing and important business. He was merely making an honest attempt to fulfil the promise he had made to the chief of the Tripod. He fell and bruised himself. His cheek and his elbows were grazed. There were bumps on his forehead. Yet with every scratch and bruise Yakup's heart became more sturdy and fearless. Unexpectedly he felt eagerness and courage welling up within him.... In other words, as Sharifulla would say, it would seem that an eagle had built its nest in Yakup's heart, but until then had never been able to spread its wings....

However, we have been so carried away by Yakup that we have forgotten all about Vazir, whom we left yesterday in a very bad way. Let Yakup carry on with his training while we find out how things are going with Vazir. By the way he lives across the way from Yakup's house, farther up the street.

LITTLE BALL OF WOOL SO ROUND

During the war and the years immediately after it, Vazir's family, like many others, had a very hard time. Perhaps that is why Vazir's mother, aunty Kurbanbika, as she is called in the village, had got into a very strange habit. She would hide the bread, salt, butter, cream, tea and sugar, so that neither her husband nor children could get at them, and she always carried with her the keys to the larder, the cupboards and chests. She continued to act in this way even when life had got back to normal and there was enough of everything in the house. As before she would keep count in a niggardly way of every bit of food. Anything eatable she kept under lock and key. At the same time she was quite indifferent to any sort of clothing, or other things, for that matter.

Because all the eatables were locked away, ever since he was a little thing Vazir had got accustomed to go rummaging

around everywhere, turning everything upside-down. Once, when he was five years old, he discovered a rye-cake hidden among the pillows. But Vazir was not stingy. He did not eat it all himself, but broke it into two equal parts, giving half to his younger brother Nasip. Another time he opened the lock of the larder with a nail and the two of them drank up the milk. Later he found keys to fit the lock of his mother's chest. They took the sugar-loaf which, their mother said, had been kept for some guests and used the hatchet to divide it. The smaller piece was Nasip's lot. The boys tirelessly practised the art of opening the locks until they knew all their secrets. In the end there was no lock in Kurbanbika's house that served its purpose.

Kurbanbika very soon guessed where the food of which she kept such a strict account disappeared to. Imprecations thundered around the children's heads. But the boys were stubborn and continued to put their skill to good use. No longer placing her trust in locks, Kurbanbika tried a new tactic. She did not put food in the chest or the larder. Such delicacies as sugar and sweets she would hide away in the pocket of an old overcoat, in a felt boot somewhere up in the attic, or put it at the bottom of a bast basket which had been hanging in the lumber room for a long time. Butter and cream migrated from the cellar to the old stove in the bathhouse. But neither of these measures gave the desired results. The boys were persistent and steadily kept up their search. They gradually learnt all their mother's secrets, one after another. It must be said in their favour that they did not throw themselves greedily on their loot. They never ate up everything they found. The search for what was hidden from them had now become an exciting game, a particularly dangerous kind of undertaking.

Special discoveries, such as money, were not excluded from the game. Isn't it interesting to go rummaging around, say, in the small stove and to pull out from under an old lamp a whole five-ruble note and then, having bought honey-cakes, to eat those honey-cakes with a merry band of friends? Vazir thought it was great fun

The scolding and curses that rained down on his head were like so much hail bouncing off the roof. But to discover where money was hidden was not an easy task. They found it once, they found it twice, but the third time they were not smart enough....

However, today it was absolutely necessary for Vazir to find some money. It was no longer fun and games for him. The disgrace into which he had fallen yesterday could only be washed away by an act of reconciliation with his comrades. It had to be done properly. Vazir began to outline a suitable plan in his head. He would find some money, go to the shop to buy honey-cakes and, inviting his friends to tuck in, he would beg their pardon. After all, the practice among the grown-ups in our parts is, if somebody has unjustifiably offended another, the offender invites the offended one to partake of a meal as his guest and asks to be forgiven. That is just what Vazir wanted to do.

His father had come in from the night shift some time before and was now fast asleep. His mother was at work. So, to get rid of an unnecessary witness, with whom there was no sense in sharing the loot in this case, he chased Nasip out of the house, sending him to tend the geese at the lake. As soon as he was alone he began to search for money. He leafed through all the books. He tipped salt out of the salt-cellar. He felt around the window and door frames. He put his head into the oven. All to no avail. Impatient and annoyed he stood in the middle of the room and carefully looked around once more.... Suddenly his glance fell on a large ball of wool apparently carelessly left on the moulding above the stove.

Vazir took the ball of wool and turned it in his hands, feeling it. His impression was that it had been wound in too much of a hurry. It was rather too soft. Vazir put the ball to his ear and pressed. He heard a crackling sound. That was strange! Having pressed and listened again, Vazir found the end of the wool and hurriedly started to unwind it.

Impatience and a wild hope made his heart beat furiously. That is how a hunter's heart beats when he has found the track of a bear. As he unwound the ball of wool Vazir even

began to sing a little song he made up on the spot. His voice was low and he drew out each word:

"Little ball of wool so round,
Tell me where the money's found."

He himself answered for the ball of wool:

"I'm a ball so soft and round,
I'll tell you where, when I'm unwound!"
"Don't worry, I have heard its sound!..."

Vazir sang quietly as he unwound the wool ever faster. A piece of green paper, folded several times, began to show through the threads of wool. At last it was in Vazir's hands. Ah-ha! Why, it was a brand-new fifty-ruble note! Wrapped up inside it was another for twenty-five rubles and one five-ruble note. Why, it was a real fortune! Vazir did not need as much as that.

"There are three notes here, dad, mum and a kid. The kid's enough for us!" Vazir told himself happily as he pocketed the five rubles.

He folded the rest of the money as he had found it. As he re-wound the wool he again began to intone his little song:

"Ball of wool, what did you see?"
"The Moon has seen and she told me—
The Sun has stolen it away.
I saw nothing all the day...."

Having finished winding the wool he put the ball where he had found it and hurried off to the shop. He bought eight honey-cakes and put them in his trouser pockets. He felt that the saleswoman looked at him rather suspiciously, as if he, Vazir, was the kind of boy who could not pay for things like honey-cakes.

But in fact, the saleswoman was not at all suspicious of him. As she looked at his bare torso she had merely thought: "It must be his mother's washing day. Doesn't the poor boy even have another shirt to put on?..." How was she to know that the "poor boy" was hardening his muscles.

On coming home Vazir hurriedly hid his cakes in the shed, putting them in the straw between the poles of the wattle wall. He had decided that at the right moment he would drop a hint to his friends that he had a secret and the three of them would climb the slope together. He would then take the honey-cakes out of his pocket and place them on the grass, while his friends would stand there surprised, exchanging glances.... Having placed all the eight cakes on the green grass, he, Vazir, would divide them into lots. Let Gabdulla and Aidar have three each. That would leave two for himself. As a matter of fact he was quite willing to take none at all. He knew how you should treat people whom you invite!

Vazir was so deep in daydreams that he was in his seventh heaven. It was hard to imagine that anybody could feel as happy as he did.

He strutted importantly along the road. Then he stood for a long time at the gateway, his bare stomach thrust out and hands behind his back. Vazir was very pleased with himself.

Suddenly Yakup appeared, coming out of the lane leading down from the mountains. He was covered with scratches, bruises and grazes.

"Hallo there, Example. What've you been up to?" Vazir enquired.

"I am not the Example any more! My name is Yakup," was the firm reply.

"Why, *batyr*! It looks as if you've tangled with a bear."

Yakup was perfectly well aware of the oath he had sworn before his comrades, but it wouldn't have been right to pass by without a word. Besides, he had only promised not to shake Vazir's hand and there's a big difference between talking to someone and shaking his hand. In other words, Yakup felt he could not walk proudly past Vazir.

"I was looking for our calf," making up the fib on the go.

"You must have been butting rocks while you were looking for that calf."

"Something like that," replied Yakup, not wanting to go into details.

"Well, you certainly do look a beauty! Still, it's nothing

much. It'll soon heal. We won't have to put any patches on you," said Vazir reassuringly.

His heart was very full today and he wanted to do some good deed or other. That is why he paid friendly attention even to Yakup, who long ago had fallen so low in the eyes of other boys. On seeing Yakup's bruises he even felt sorry for him. But that did not seem enough. He wanted to make Yakup feel better in some way.

As for Yakup, he was occupied with thoughts of quite a different kind. Instead of having passed Vazir without so much as a word of greetings, not wanting to upset the other boy, Yakup was actually standing there talking magnanimously with him....

If only Vazir had been able to get a hint of those hidden thoughts, without a doubt there would have appeared another couple of bumps on the Example's head. However, Vazir suspected nothing. When people are in good spirits they act as if they were blind. Not only did he not guess what Yakup was thinking about him, but his heart was so full of truly good will towards the Example that, without second thoughts, he pulled his most valued catapult out of his pocket. The catapult was painted red and was famous throughout the whole street.

"Do you like it?" asked Vazir.

"Why, of course I like it!"

"Do you need it?"

"Yes, but..." stammered Yakup.

"If you need it, take it! I give it to you for keeps."

Yakup felt his head swimming and little red devils dancing in front of his eyes. Vazir held out the catapult to him.

"Take it while the taking's good!" he said decisively.

His voice helped to bring Yakup to his senses.

"And I'll give you a rubber ball, and a bicycle bell. You don't know how loud it rings!" Yakup whispered excitedly.

"You don't have to. Presents aren't paid for. I've got a whole trunkful of catapults."

Yakup stretched out his hand uncertainly. He still was not sure whether Vazir was joking, perhaps pulling his leg. But

Vazir the magnanimous, the generous, was far above any low tricks or mockery. With a trembling hand Yakup took the catapult and put it in his trouser pocket.

"I will give you..." Yakup began.

Vazir again interrupted him sharply:

"I don't want anything. You run off home and learn to shoot."

"All right," nodded Yakup and, with his hand pressed to the bulky treasure in his pocket, scurried off home.

Suddenly Gulnur appeared in front of Vazir. She was grinning from ear to ear and under her arm she had a bundle of red calico.

"Oh, aren't you ashamed of yourself, not even putting on a shirt?" she asked in a penetrating stage-whisper.

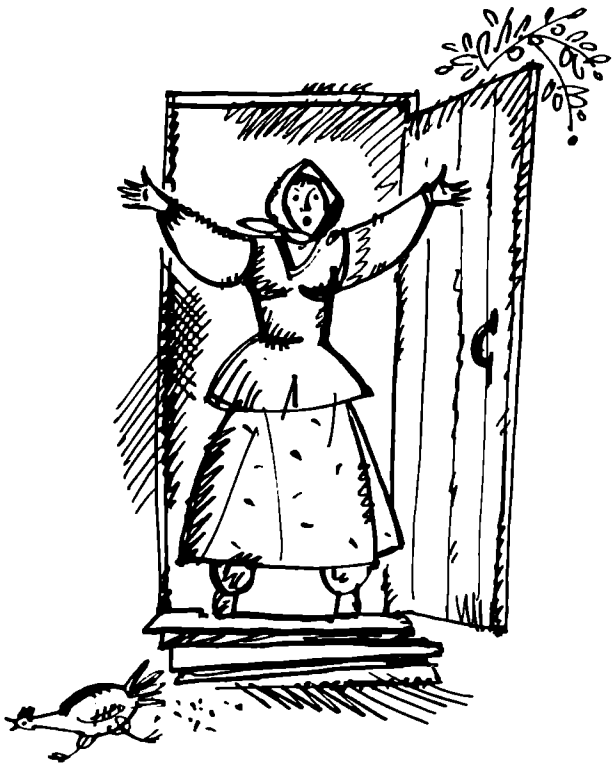
"Get going, go on!..."

"Oh, yes. I'm going—to Aunty Yamlikha with this calico. She's going to sew me a lovely dress!" the little girl informed him and, nodding to indicate the direction, she added: "Aidar and Gabdulla have gone to the far end of Sword Lake. They didn't take me with them, still they're going to catch skylarks for me. Two of them."

Gulnur, having finished her chattering, went on her way. She could not know how her words had hurt Vazir and how miserable they made him. The well-fed never understand the hungry ones, as they say. Vazir, who only a moment before had felt the happiest of boys, now hung his head. Yesterday's trials and troubles came flooding back. So it was true that his comrades had given him the cold shoulder! Could it really be that he, Vazir, could end up like Yakup, spurned by everybody?

Vazir still did not know that on that very day Yakup's star had begun its ascent. If he had known he probably would not have given Yakup the weapon shaped by his own hands.

"This very evening I must find some suitable excuse for offering my comrades the honey-cakes and ask them to forgive me. Otherwise life will not be worth living..." thought Vazir anxiously.



THE EXAMPLE BECOMES JUST YAKUP

When Yakup appeared at the door of his house his mother clasped her head in horror and for a long time could not utter a word. Her face went pale, then took on a blue tinge and went pale again.... At last, waving her hands, she screamed shrilly:

"They've nearly killed my son! What mad-dog did that to you, my darling one?... Oh, my child is dying, he's dying!"

Yakup, who had no intention of dying, calmly shrugged his shoulders and said triumphantly:

"I was playing and jumping among the rocks, Mummy! It was great fun. Only I had a fall."

Gulemesh-apai continued her lament:

"I know that confounded Vazir is at the bottom of all this! Be quite sure I shall go to the collective farm office and make the management bring that hooligan to his senses!"

Yakup could not stand there saying nothing while false accusations were being made against someone who had just displayed unheard-of generosity, making a present of his own catapult. He even felt a sort of pang somewhere inside himself.

"Mummy, you leave Vazir alone. He's my friend now. I tripped and fell by myself. Anyone who trips by himself ought not to cry!" Yakup said seriously.

However, his mother was still upset.

"You aren't the sort of child to trip just like that. Don't talk nonsense. How many times have I told you not to go near Vazir? How many times have I told you not to make friends with him? He's a bad lot."

Yakup, who had no way of convincing his mother of Vazir's innocence, suddenly had a daring idea.

"All right, Mummy, you'll see for yourself how I shall climb to the top of that elm over there and jump down. And I won't whimper, either!"

Having made his threat, Yakup rushed towards the elm growing alone by the fence. Before he could grasp the lowest of the branches his mother overtook him and caught hold of him.

It should be said that Yakup more than once had tried to climb that tree, but never made it. It is very doubtful that he would have been able to climb it this time, either. Nevertheless, this latest outburst made a deep impression on his mother. Her voice trembled as she said:

"Don't be foolish, my little one." Hugging her son, she tried to drag him away from the tree.

"It looks as if the child is out of his mind!" she thought with horror.

To be sure, what Yakup wanted to do did seem very

strange. Why! Until then he had done only what his mother had told him.

"My baby, my baby!" repeated Gulemesh-apai in terror and confusion. But Yakup would not listen and struggled to free himself from his mother's arms so as to get to the tree.

"Let go of me, I tell you! Let go! I said I would jump and I shall!"

Gulemesh-apai felt exhausted. She was sure that something dreadful had happened to her child and she spoke to him in a soothing voice, such as people use with the insane, trying to calm him:

"All right, sonny, you'll jump all right. Of course you will. Only tomorrow. All right? Now we'll go into the house and I'll give you some cream and sweet biscuits...."

On hearing about such delicious things, Yakup, who was hungry, stopped struggling. Naturally he had no inkling of his mother's fears and triumphantly thought: "Anyway, I did make Mummy believe I was going to jump."

Still hugging her son, Gulemesh-apai led him into the house. Once at the table, Yakup quickly finished off a cup of cream and a respectable heap of biscuits. He would have eaten more, but was too shy to ask.

Gulemesh-apai did not take her eyes off him, anxiously thinking: "What can I do? His father is away and I have no word from him and now this dreadful thing has happened!"

"Don't your cuts hurt you, sonny?" she asked unhappily.

"No," replied Yakup, feeling one of the lumps on his head.

His mother's heart missed a beat. "Could he have hurt his head so badly that he can't even feel pain any more?"

"Lie down, sonny. I'm sure you are very tired," she said fixing the bed.

Yakup, who had been making a great effort all the morning to overcome his "exemplariness", really was worn out, so he did not argue and lay down. When he did so he felt a hard object against his hip and felt for the catapult in his trouser pocket. It was there all right! Yakup's tiredness disappeared at once. He wanted to jump off the bed immediately, but ... he

pretended to be asleep and even made a good imitation of snoring.

Believing her son had really dropped off to sleep, Gulemesh-apai carefully made for the door. She had decided to go to the forest-guard who lived about a mile down the road from the village. His daughter was a doctor and had come with her two children to spend a holiday with her father. Gulemesh-apai decided to ask the doctor to examine her son.

The door closed behind his mother with a slight squeak. When he heard the gate close Yakup jumped up and ran into the yard. He looked through a crack in the fence trying to see where his mother was going. She had not gone to the collective farm office, nor had she gone in the direction of Vazir's house. Yakup saw that his mother was heading for the outskirts of the village and, feeling more at ease, pulled out his catapult. What wonderful things fall into the hands of a *djigit*! Yakup turned the catapult with his fingers, gazing with delight at the smooth red handle. Now the only thing was to get down to business. The ground near the porch was strewn with sand and pebbles. He collected pebbles in his cap and sat down comfortably on the porch. Before starting to shoot he had to find a suitable target. There was no difficulty in that. There couldn't be a more suitable target than the green pail upturned on the fork of a post near the pantry.

Having loaded his catapult, Yakup began to take aim. For a long time he screwed up first one eye, then the other. After that he tried with both eyes open. Finally he pulled the elastic strip of the catapult back so far that it became very narrow. Then he released it. He did not even notice where the stone went to, because the elastic band he had released so suddenly slapped his cut finger so hard that red spots before his eyes prevented him from seeing. If such a thing had happened to him before that day, he would have thrown the catapult away and rushed crying to his mother. But those were bygone days. This small accident merely strengthened his determination. Putting his injured finger to his lips he blew on it a couple of times and again got down to his undertaking. He shot a second time, and a third, fourth and a fifth, but the

green pail hung motionless. There was not even the faintest clang.

Then Yakup stepped off the porch and, advancing two steps in the direction of the pantry, began to shoot again, this time standing up. The sixth time he shot there was a dull ringing sound as the round stone grazed the green side of the pail and spun off into the grass.

"One bull's-eye!" he proclaimed triumphantly. He had often heard Vazir say that. He now repeated it with satisfaction.

However, it was a long time before he scored a second bull's-eye. Yakup's spirits were beginning to droop when one of the little round stones from his catapult found quite a different target. True, the green pail remained in its place, but the upper pane of the pantry window was shattered and fell tinkling to the ground. At that very moment the gate opened with a faint creak. Yakup, carried away by his excitement, noticed nothing. Again, taking careful aim at the pail, he released the elastic band, and again there was the tinkle of glass. He had shattered the lower pane of the pantry window.

Gulemesh-apai and the doctor, who had just come into the yard, halted in amazement. The terrified mother rushed at Yakup with a shrill cry and seized his hand.

"Oh, son of mine!"

Yakup hardly had time to slip the catapult into his pocket. However, his mother had no thought for such things as that.

"And that is your sick child?" the doctor asked Gulemesh as she approached.

"Yes, yes. He's the one. My only child!"

They led Yakup into the house. The doctor examined his throat and his eyes. Then she made him stretch out on the bed and felt his stomach. After that she put two rubber tubes into her ears and listened to the boy's chest. Then she looked at his eyes again.

"There is absolutely nothing wrong with your child," she informed the mother.

"What? Do you think healthy children behave in that way? Just look, he's one mass of gashes and bruises!"

"If he were ill, he would not go jumping about and if he had not been jumping he would not have fallen. Isn't that so, *djigit*?" smiled the doctor.

The *djigit* nodded. But his mother insisted:

"What salve shall I rub into his scratches?"

"Nothing of the sort is needed. They will heal by themselves."

"That doctor hasn't got a heart," Gulemesh-apai thought. However, the doctor did have a heart, and a very kind one at that. Only she could not stand people who made a lot of fuss about nothing. She packed her instruments in her bag and, saying goodbye, left.

"What's to be done? Perhaps that's how it ought to be..." thought the frightened Gulemesh-apai. All the rest of the day she kept a sharp eye on her son, not letting him leave the house, even go to the yard, but just before sunset, when the herd was returning from the pasture, Gulemesh-apai noticed that her calf must have strayed and was lingering behind. So she went to look for it. Before leaving she sternly warned her son:

"Don't you dare go out into the yard!"

Not being too sure that the boy would obey her, Gulemesh-apai locked the door from the outside. If she had not done that, perhaps Yakup would have stayed home. But who is going to remain calmly locked up like a goat in a shed? So Yakup jumped out of the window. One of the days allotted by the chieftain was already coming to its end and Yakup was worried that he might not have enough time to practise properly. So he began training again. Before his mother returned he had managed to knock the cowling off the chimney of the bathhouse, to break an earthenware pot lying on the earth bank around the house and to dent a copper pot belonging to old Kyunbika, one of the neighbours....

Old Kyunbika herself neither saw nor heard anything, but one of the other neighbours began to shout angrily at Yakup:

"What has happened to you? Have you turned into another Vazir, you horrid boy? To think that such bad boys are born

to such good folk! As if he doesn't know how to behave! You just wait until your mother comes home! You naughty boy!"

It was the first time in his life that Yakup had been called "naughty", but he did not seem put out by it. Nobody would ever hold up a "naughty" or "horrid" boy as an example and that meant that the lads of the village from now on would stop teasing Yakup by calling him the Example.

THE FISH ARE PLAYING IN THE LAKE....

The sun was setting. Choppy little waves had been driven rapidly by the wind all day long, at times sweeping away from the shore and at times playfully pressing up against it, but towards evening they died down, as if tired out. Or perhaps the wind, who was the one who had kept the game going, decided to let them rest while it flew off to the mountains to play among the branches of the luxuriant pine-trees, ripping off their long, sharp needles. The wind can always find work to do wherever it may be.

As for birds, they always know the right time to sing. They are not very fond of singing in the midday heat, but they love to twitter their songs in the twilight, when the cool air refreshes the earth. Then every bush on Sword Lake has its own special song. Just sit and listen.

The fish, too, love to gambol in the morning and the evening. As they splash in the clear water, they leave big and

small rings on its surface and some of the more playful ones jump high out of the water and make their silvery scales gleam as if boasting: "Look how beautiful we are!"

Many of those fish playing so merrily were destined to leave their lake very, very soon and to be carried off to a strange place at the top of Peak Kiramet. Never again would they return to their birthplace, to the waters of Sword Lake! Of course the fish knew nothing about it. If they could have had so much as an inkling, they would not have been so gay and carefree.

With birds it is quite another matter. You can take birds far, far away to the deepest forest, but they will always find their way back to their nesting places. How good it is to live in the air and on the dry ground! It's quite different from living in the water. Well, let fish swim and birds sing while we take a look at the thickets of purple willows growing on the shore of the lake. First we catch a glimpse of a pitch-black head. Then next to it a red head appears. Although it is difficult to see to whom these two heads belong, it is easy enough to guess that their owners are the chieftain Gabdulla and his loyal comrade Aidar. They are here on an important mission. There can be no doubt about that, because the two supports of the Tripod are so busy weaving a big fishtrap that they do not speak a word. Aidar is demonstrating such very great skill, that Gabdulla, even though he is the leader, willingly takes upon himself the simple preparatory work. He searches the thicket for the most supple willow switches, cuts them off with his grandmother's knife, removes any twigs and hands them to Aidar.

"What an expert you are, brother!" The tone in which Gabdulla said this might lead one to suspect that he was trying to flatter his comrade. Well, when your own hands do not possess the skill that other's do, you can only lend a hand and wish you could do the same.

It was a real pleasure to see Aidar at work. His agile, wind-chapped hands seemed untiring. The long flexible osiers were like silk ribbons in his skilful fingers. He seemed to be weaving, not a simple fishtrap, but delicate and precious

lace. Not once, in all that time, did he utter a word about his skill. There was not a shadow of self-satisfaction on his face. He would just sniff once in a while as he concentrated on the job he was doing.

That is how a true master of his trade behaves.

The fish played. The birds sang. The boys weaved and nobody payed any attention to a lad with no shirt on, who was creeping along the shore. True, the slim willow branches that touched his bare shoulders tried to whisper something, but nobody lent an ear to their rustling. Moving forward a little, the boy lay face down in the thicket and began to keep a careful watch on the two comrades who were absorbed in the work on hand. The boy blinked continuously as if a bright light were shining in his face, but his sharp eyes took in everything and, having come to some conclusion, he took a handful of harsh marsh-grass, and, without pulling it out by the roots, twisted it into a knot as one does with a horse's tail. In the forests in our parts folk often leave that kind of sign behind them, so as not to lose their way, or to mark a certain place. It looked as if the boy had decided to leave a clue of his own. After all, the shores of Sword Lake are vast and, if you don't look out, you can easily get lost in a wilderness of rushes.

It is not unusual to meet boys in the summer who go around without a shirt, so as to temper themselves, but in Golden Eagle Village you would not often find such an agile and cautious lad as this. Anyone who had ever set eyes on that round face, those eyelashes and constantly blinking eyes, those rapid, feline movements, would immediately recognise Vazir.

Having checked on everything, Vazir cautiously crept away to the depths of the forest and, slipping into the long grass like a quail, he disappeared.

Gabdulla and Aidar finished the job of weaving and, while resting, feasted their eyes on the basket-work cage their hands had wrought. And a well-made and beautiful object it was! Aidar, like a real artisan, was carefully testing the results of their labour. He opened and closed the lid of the fishtrap several times and examined it from every angle. Then the

boys took off their trousers and walked to the edge of the lake.

They selected a heavy stone and placed it on the bottom of the big fishtrap, which they then dragged out into the water. The trap did not sink to the bottom immediately. They had to tie it to the rushes. Fearing that the crawfish might attack their fish, the boys shut the lid as tightly as could be. They even tied it up with strips of willow bark. They also knew that at this time of the summer it would be unforgivable ignorance to sit and wait for fish to find their way into the trap. If you wait for a fish that has lost its way, you could very well wait all the summer through. Tomorrow they would come fishing with four fishing rods and get down to serious angling. Only they would have to hook the fish just as soon as they started nibbling, so they would not swallow the hook and die.

They could see a large number of fish leaping out of the water. The whole lake was flashing with the silver of their scales. It seemed to the boys that the fish, playing so merrily, were simply dreaming of being hooked as soon as possible so as to be transferred to their new lake. Who does not love to travel? Who does not like to visit new and interesting places? Surely fish do!

"Play away! Go on!" Gabdulla said approvingly. "You'll soon have an even better playground."

Having finished what they set out to do, the lads hurried off home.

ONE RAINY MORNING

In our parts even the summer rains last for a very long time. Once it begins raining, it goes on for days and days on end, pattering monotonously. That is why they say it rains without a breathing spell. But at such times the earth drinks its fill and thoroughly enjoys itself. The wet black earth shines like a boy's lips when he has just eaten up his porridge with butter.

The rain began at midnight and fell without stopping until morning, but four boys in four separate houses did not sit twiddling their thumbs. As soon as he had taken the hornless brown cow to the herd, Gabdulla went to visit Aidar. The two friends made four good and sturdy fishing rods. They fixed up a bag out of old fishing nets and behind the barn they dug up plenty of worms for bait.

"The rain keeps on and on, just to make things worse for us," Gubdulla said miserably. "What a time to choose! It's messed up everything."

Aidar, who likes to see the bright side of everything, tried to encourage his friend:

"Let it pour. It will rain and rain until it stops. But the corn will grow well. Tomorrow will roll around just the same and the fish bite all the better after rain."

"Anything seems all right to you. You never use your loaf!" Gabdulla said angrily. "Where are we to get a boat? Have you thought about that?"

"Why do we need a boat? The fish bite all right near the shore."

"Nothing doing! It wouldn't be right for us to go wading along the shore like little boys fishing for tiddlers," Gabdulla said and added sedately: "Those times have gone forever!"

True, no self-respecting angler would think of fishing from the shores of Sword Lake with rod and line. Big fish like deep water and real fishermen go out to the middle of the lake in boats to fish.

"Well, yes, we'll have to think up some way of getting a boat," Aidar agreed. "By the way, the Example's granddad has gone to town to visit some folk. Only there's a big padlock on the chain. If only we could find a key...."

The chieftain issued another order:

"Set the Example the task of getting the boat."

At that very moment an agreeable conversation was being held in Vazir's house.

"At the break of day I prepared the batter for pancakes," Kurbanbika-apai said. "Thought I'd give my children a treat. Now I'm going to heat the stove until it glows red...."

"What side are you going to put the butter on, Mummy? The smooth or the rough side?" asked Nasip.

"I'll butter both sides, the smooth and the rough, sonny. Go to the yard and bring in some dry firewood."

"They're going to be tasty, those pancakes are!" said Nasip, smacking his lips. He soon came back with an armful of dry logs.

The mother found work for Vazir, too.

"Now then, you run over to Granny Yamlegul and ask her to lend you a frying-pan. If I use two pans things will go a lot

faster. Run like the wind, Vazir, one foot here and the other foot there!"

It was a pleasant task, otherwise Vazir would have dug his heels in, grumbling: "Let that Nasip of yours go." In this case he did not start arguing. He slipped his bare feet into his father's top-boots and ran out into the yard.

"Vazir!" Kurbanbika screamed after him. "Where are you off to without a shirt? People will laugh at you! What a good for nothing you are! At least put on your father's padded coat. Why, it's raining cats and dogs!"

However, Vazir did not so much as glance back. So Nasip answered for him:

"Why Mum, he doesn't need a coat! He is tempering his muscles. Our Vazir will be as strong as a *batyr*. You'll see! Even if an angry bull tries to charge him, he'll throw it to the ground with his little finger!"

"He'll throw it, he will! But what if he catches cold and starts coughing and sneezing? What a fuss there'll be!"

"*Batyrs* don't catch colds!"

"Oh dear, there's another fool in the family! As if one wasn't enough! What a chatterbox you are!"

Today Kurbanbika was in a very good mood. That inspector with the spectacles who had come from the city of Ufa the day before had praised her, saying:

"You do a fine job of work, Kurbanbika. You are going to be one of the best women workers in all the district."

"Why, thank you! It is kind of you to say that," replied Kurbanbika happily. "Your words are like manna to me!"

So it turned out that the making of the batter for today's pancakes had actually begun the day before because, when she heard her work being praised, she had decided to treat the children to some pancakes. The stove was soon hot and the golden pancakes were sizzling in the frying-pan, but as for Vazir he had vanished into thin air.

TO HANDLE A BOAT

The houses stood in even rows on either side of the street. Only Grandmother Yamlegul's cottage stood all alone at the far end of Lakeside Lane, like a cow that's strayed from the herd. Or could it be the little house felt offended for some reason and had turned its back on the village? No, do not go imagining that. Everybody in the village is very fond of Grandmother Yamlegul. Her neighbours often invite her to their houses and always give her a warm welcome.

That cottage has a story all of its own. The one-time man of the house, Myrzabai, had been a magnificent fisherman. He believed that a fisherman's place was near the water, so he built his cottage on the shore of the lake. He and his wife Yamlegul lived very happily together and had two sons. But one day when the waves were quietly lapping the shores of Sword Lake, misfortune descended upon the house of

Myrzabai. His two sons marched off to war and neither came home again. Myrzabai himself died just before Victory Day. When the war was over and things began to get better in the village, the managing board of the collective farm decided that Myrzabai's cottage ought to be moved to the centre of the village, where there was an unoccupied lot. But Granny would not permit this: "Never shall I move my cottage away from the place where my sons grew up," she declared.

If Grandmother Yamlegul had agreed she would have been living only a stone's throw away and Vazir, who had gone for the frying-pan, would have returned long ago. As it were, he had disappeared without a trace.

Vazir, splashing through the mud, ran to the end of the lane. He was very close to the gate of Yamlegul's cottage, when he stopped to look at the lake. Some geese were squatting dejectedly on the shore. The reeds were drooping and beyond them, a little further out on the lake, there was a boat quite alone and rocking from side to side. Through the slashing rain Vazir's sharp eyes could make out a familiar figure sitting in it, clumsily using his paddle.

"Bah! It's Yakup again!"

All thoughts of pancakes and frying-pans flew right out of Vazir's mind. It was impossible for him not to run and watch Yakup handling the boat. Who ever heard of such a thing—Yakup the Example ploughing the waters of the lake in the pouring rain!

Vazir ran down to the shore and kept watch on Yakup from behind the rushes.

Yakup did not turn his eyes to the shore and so did not notice Vazir. He was working away with the paddle trying to guide the boat, all to no avail. It merely turned round in circles. Sometimes jerking ahead, or moving broadside, it would list heavily. The wind, blowing from the shore, was slowly driving the boat towards the middle of the lake.

Vazir could not stand it.

"Hey, Example!" he shouted, "what are you doing out there?" Yakup looked around, quite confused, but he immediately took himself in hand.

"I'm learning to handle Grandfather's new boat," he called out loudly.

"Learning! Some pupil you are! Whoever sits in the middle of a boat with a paddle? You must stand up. Get up at once," ordered Vazir.

Yakup leaned over the side and looked at the water apprehensively.

"The water is very deep here and the boat is rocking...."

"Don't be scared, silly! It's not at all deep there. Wouldn't even come up to your neck."

"Oh, I ... er.... I'm not scared!" Yakup got to his feet unsteadily and stood in the centre of the boat.

"Move back to the rear! Nobody paddles a boat standing in the middle."

Yakup cautiously made his way to the rear.

"That's better!" Vazir commended him. "Now start to paddle. Begin on the right side. The right, I tell you! Don't you know your left from your right? This is the right, look."

Vazir raised his right hand, but, because they were now facing each other, to Yakup his comrade's right side was seen as his own left. Vazir noticed his mistake, but did not admit it. He merely added quickly:

"Hey, Yakup, there! Paddle any way you like. Do you hear me? Paddle as you like, I say!"

Yakup carefully dipped his paddle, first on the right side, then on the left. Vazir, waving his hands as he splashed through the mud, ran along the shore impatiently issuing orders:

"Paddle on that side. Now on the other. That's it! On that side. Now on the other. Back now to the right side again!"

The boat twisted and rocked, slowly approaching the shore, but that did not seem to satisfy Vazir, who could not bear to see a person making a mess of such a simple thing as paddling a boat.

"Don't put your paddle in so deep. Not so deep! You'd think you were digging potatoes! Take a longer stroke. Longer, I tell you! Don't stand there swaying like a pendulum! Stand up straight. That's it!"

Vazir shouted his orders fiercely and Yakup obeyed him. However, at the very moment when it seemed to him that he was getting the knack of it, everything suddenly went wrong.

"A longer stroke!" Vazir shouted again, "Longer, I tell you!"

Plucking up his courage, Yakup gave a wide sweep and dug his paddle into the water. The boat rocked dangerously.

"Sit down," Vazir yelled. But there was nobody to sit down, for Yakup had fallen slap into the water. Only his check cap floated on the waves. Vazir opened his mouth wide in his surprise. He stood on the shore as if frozen, gazing at the cap.

Just as the sodden cap began to sink into the water, Yakup's head popped up not far from it. Then Vazir came to his senses and like a pebble released from a catapult, he plunged into the water. His top-boots immediately stuck fast in the silt and left his feet free, although Vazir did not notice this as he sped towards the boat where Yakup's head sometimes popped up and then went under again. The water was not really deep there. It would only have come up to Yakup's ears, but a person who cannot swim does not need much water to drown in.

Vazir swam up to the unsuccessful boatman and, grabbing him by the collar, pulled him to the bank. Once they were on dry land Vazir saw that Yakup's face was chalk-white. Vazir set him firmly on his feet and, licking his lips, now blue with cold, said jokingly:

"Did you find the water in the lake tasty?"

But Yakup only shook his head forlornly. He did not seem to have found the water to his taste at all.

"You go home," said Vazir, "I'll dive in again and try to find your cap."

"Don't trouble," Yakup said with an effort; his teeth were chattering with cold and his voice trembled. "Don't trouble. As long as my head's still on my shoulders, a cap will come with time."

Vazir did not really want to plunge into the cold water again.

"The cap, yes, the cap," he said thoughtfully. Then, glancing at the lake he suddenly started to wave his hands.

"The boat is drifting away.... The boat and the paddle!" he shouted as he ran and, throwing himself into the lake, with powerful strokes he swam to the boat. Having seized the paddle that had been rocking on the waves, he caught hold of the boat and with a single jerk he drew himself over its side. In a moment he was paddling easily to the shore.

Yakup was still shivering with cold and fright.

"If only I could swim like Vazir!" he thought enviously.

Vazir, who was wet through, pulled the boat up onto the shore and went to look for his top-boots. He had no trouble in finding them, because the water was shallow where the silt had pulled them off his feet and their tops were showing above the water. Vazir pulled at them and they left the mud with a sucking sound. Vazir pored the water out of them and said cheerfully:

"It's just grand, Father's boots have had quite a bath. It's a pity I've got to go home barefoot. Who wants to splash mud over such clean boots!"

Yakup stood motionless in the place where Vazir had left him. His friend came up and, slapping him on the back, said encouragingly:

"You'll turn out to be a good egg yet! You still don't know how to do things the right way. Still, you'll turn out all right!"

"Is that true?"

"Of course, it's true! Have you ever heard me talk a lot of rot?"

"Certainly not!"

"All right then. Now what are we going to do?"

"I don't know. But I suppose we'd better take Granddad's boat back to its place."

The boys pushed the boat into the water.

"Pick up that paddle. Don't be in too much of a hurry though," said the tutor to his pupil.

Yakup guided the boat parallel to the shore. Vazir continued to give him instructions, but Yakup, already having been thoroughly baptised in the spirit of boats, felt more sure of himself and he paddled his grandfather's boat all the way to its berth.

They were fastening it to the post with its chain and putting the big padlock on it, when Yakup's mother suddenly appeared as if from nowhere. She immediately began to berate the boys loudly:

"Oh, what an unhappy woman I am! This child makes me go through fire and water for him! My little one, you look like a water rat. Of course, it is all Vazir's doing! My name won't be Gulemesh-apai if I don't go to the farm management this very day to complain about that Vazir! What have you done with my child? Where's his cap?"

Gulemesh-apai tried to take her son by the hand but he pulled away brusquely.

"Mum, if you say one more word against Vazir, I shall.... I shall get into that boat again and row ever so far away! And if I do, I'll never, never come back again. Remember that!"

Gulemesh-apai threw a glance meant to kill at Vazir, who was standing silently to one side. However, she guided the conversation along other channels.

"All right, all right! I won't say anything. Have your own way, but let's go home now."

Again she tried to take her son by the hand, but he would not let her do so, saying: "I can walk by myself. Only not a single word against Vazir!"

"All right, all right! I promised I wouldn't say anything and I won't...."

Mother and son made their way home. Vazir, holding the top-boots under his arm, remained standing on the shore of the lake. He was in no hurry, since he had long ago forgotten about the frying-pan and the pancakes that were waiting for him at home.

AFTER THE RAIN

It rained the livelong day, but towards evening it stopped at last. The clouds which, it seemed, were going to cover the sky forever, parted for a very short time. They blew away and the sun again took possession of the blue sky washed clean by the rain. And only the tiniest raindrops, as if they had got lost somewhere overhead, fell to the ground from time to time. Perhaps those droplets were the rain's little ones who had been playing in the sky and did not manage to fall together with the big raindrops. After all, say what you will, children will be children and, once they get carried away by the games they are playing, they forget everything else in the wide world.

The droplets are so warm and tender! If you hold out the palm of your hand to them, they will trustingly sprinkle it with

little sparkling jewels, and if you close your hand suddenly they will quickly run out between your fingers. What playful little things they are!

"Ah-ha! Now I've got you!" Gulnur cried, gazing at the raindrop that had fallen on her hand. "Why are you so warm? Up there, nearer to the sun, it must be very warm!"

Gulnur opened her hand and, holding it palm upwards, began to call out to the other droplets, laughing:

"Drop, drop on my palm!"

She found a place for herself on the log near the fence, not paying the slightest attention to Gabdulla and Aidar, who were sitting at the other end of the log in silent thought. The boys were down in the dumps. What did it matter to them if the kids were squealing and laughing as they went splashing through the puddles and rivulets of warm rain-water, or if Gulnur was twittering all the time to the droplets she was catching on the palm of her hand? They had their own troubles.

"That Example will never be any good," said Aidar, thinking aloud. "When you don't need him he's always underfoot, but when he is needed he never turns up.... He's a softy!"

Gabdulla merely spat between his teeth. That went to show how deeply annoyed he was.

As for Aidar, having remained silent for a while, he began again:

"I expect he's got cold feet! The old man's boat is the best there is, though. It doesn't leak at all."

Gabdulla suddenly asked:

"Am I the chief?"

"Of course you are!" Aidar assured him.

"Well then, go and tell the Example to come here right away."

"I'll go if you say so, but if his mother sees me, she'll make a row and won't let Yakup come out for anything in the world!"

Aidar glanced at his sister. Now Gulnur was trying to persuade the grass, flattened by the rain, to stand up again and to look at the sun.

"Hey, Gulnur, my smart little sister," Aidar said affectionately, "you know I promised to catch a couple of baby skylarks for you?"

Gulnur immediately ran up to her brother.

"Yes, I know, but you still haven't caught them!"

"I'll catch them. You'll see. I'll give them to you when your lovely red dress is ready. All right?"

"All right." Gulnur nodded and was about to return to her place on the log, when her brother stopped her, saying:

"I'll make you a cage for the larks, too, and I'll paint it blue for you."

"And I'll sprinkle seeds for my little birds!" declared Gulnur happily.

"Of course, you will! But you just listen to me. You're a big girl now."

Although at that particular moment Gulnur did not really want to be a "big girl", she said nothing, because she longed to own those baby birds. Her friend Alfia had some little birds, but she, Gulnur, had none as yet.

So the little girl looked straight at her brother with trust and happiness shining in her eyes.

"Now, little sister, you run and tell Yakup to come out at once, but make sure his mother doesn't hear you."

Gulnur ran towards Yakup's house, her bare feet splashing through the puddles. When she came to the gates, she stopped and, putting her eye to a crack in the fence, could see the whole yard. Yakup was sitting on a heap of firewood, whittling something with a knife. He was so absorbed by the job that he did not even raise his head. Gulnur did not dare to call out to him, in case his mother heard. Having thought for a little while, she picked up a stone slightly bigger than her own fist, and, standing on tiptoe, tossed it over the fence. The stone splashed into a puddle not far from Yakup. He started and looked around. Yakup thought he could see a rosy finger poking through the fence. But then he thought he might have been mistaken. So he went nearer. The finger poking through the crack began waving to-and-fro and up-and-down. Then it began scratching the paling energetically.

"Who's there?" whispered Yakup.

"It's me," Gulnur hissed, "my brother Aidar and Gabdulla want you to come out. They said you should be quick about it, too. If you don't come soon they'll be angry and will know that the Example will never be worth a thing.... They're sitting on the log outside our house."

"All right. Don't stand there chattering. Get going. Run along!"

"I'm off!"

This time, however, Gulnur ran in the opposite direction. She had suddenly remembered about the pretty dress Yamlikha was making for her. Gulnur hurried on to find out how her dress was getting along, because, at the same time as she was to get the dress, she would also get the baby birds. That meant there were three treats waiting for her, two birds and one dress. Ah, then there was the cage, too! So there would be four treats.

* * *

Yakup did not keep his comrades waiting long. He went through the potato field to the shore of the lake and then along the lane to the street. It was a long way round, but much safer, because Gulemesh-apai's wicket-gate, which opened up directly onto the street, would squeak and so immediately let its owner know that someone had entered or left the yard. Gabdulla and Aidar had not seen Yakup for two days. In that time his face had become slightly pinched and he still sported dark-yellow bruises on his forehead. He gave the impression of having grown taller and he even held himself straighter. Surprised, the chieftain asked:

"Who slapped those colours onto you?"

"I did it myself."

"Don't tell lies!"

"I swear by bread and salt! I have got rid of everything that used to make me an example. I've learnt how to jump along the ridges of rock. You told me to yourself. Only I can't swim yet."

"You'll learn after you've swallowed a couple of buckets of lake water."

"I'll learn all right," Yakup said uneasily. The water he had swallowed that morning in the lake was still making him gag.

He wanted to tell Gabdulla about all he had achieved, but Gabdulla was not asking him to, so Yakup decided to put it off.

"When is your granddad coming home?" Aidar asked.

"Granddad — I don't think he'll be back for a long time. Why?"

"Where does he keep the keys for the boat?"

"I don't know."

"Come off it! You don't know!" the chief said sharply. "Tomorrow at dawn we must be out on the lake. We'll meet while it's still dark, behind Granny Yamlegul's bathhouse. Make sure your boat is ready by the evening."

Yakup's happiness knew no bounds. To think that his comrades had such trust in him! His joy was natural, after all, he had been spurned by everybody and suddenly the captain of the Tripod had entrusted him with such an important job! Yakup was very excited. His usually pale face became flushed. His eyes shone. He found it good to be accepted as an equal among boys of his own age.

"The boat is ready right now!" he cried happily. "She's all shipshape and ready to sail!"

"Ready, says he! There's a blooming great padlock on it! As big as your fist!"

"That doesn't mean a thing! Although it is a big padlock, it's like a dog that's all bark and no bite. Granddad leaves it on the boat just for show."

"But won't your grandfather be in a rage when he finds out?" asked Aidar with a worried look.

"I don't think so. Granddad and me are pals."

While the three supports of the Tripod were talking so seriously, Vazir came strolling along the other side of the street. He had an independent air about him. His hands were thrust into his pockets and as he walked he whistled a little tune, as if he did not care in the least about the three boys, as

if everything was going fine for him. Moreover, he made believe that he was out there on the street shirtless just to harden his muscles.

Vazir walked slowly along one side of the street and came back on the other, but none of the boys turned or even so much as glanced at him. To be more exact, they really did take a peep at him, but pretended not to. Not one of the three lads sitting on the log could make up his mind to pronounce the name Vazir, as if it were not their former friend and comrade who was wandering along the street, but some stray lamb that could not find the right gate. In fact it was worse than that, since any of them would have got up to open the gate for a stray lamb.

When he came back again, Vazir crossed over to the side where the boys were sitting. Coming up to the Tripod, he took his hands out of his pockets and tried to look pitiful. Vazir found it very difficult to eat humble pie before his comrades. He felt so sorry for himself that he nearly started to cry. But he could see no other way of making up, so, as he came abreast of the boys, he mustered all his will-power and came to a halt in front of the chieftain.

"Gabdulla," he said in a quavering and sad little voice, "I took that knife back at once. If you don't believe me, you can ask Sharifulla himself. And may my hands wither away if ever again I lay them on what isn't mine!"

Vazir hoped to win the chief over with these words. As for Aidar, he would not go against his captain.

Gabdulla, about to interrupt Vazir roughly and decisively, raised his head but ... found that he could not pronounce a single sharp word. Vazir stood blinking very rapidly and his upper lip was twitching. His arms were all in goose-flesh. There was a deep and fresh scratch across his chest. That was a reminder of how he had saved Yakup's boat that morning. His pitiful expression made Gabdulla forget his anger. He even felt a pang in his heart. Before Gabdulla's eyes there appeared another Vazir, his former friend, with whom he had grown up. At such moments you recall everything. Gabdulla remembered how once, long ago, they had been playing in the

forest, throwing their caps in the air. Gabdulla's cap had been caught on the very highest branch and was left hanging there, no matter how hard they tried to knock it off with sticks and stones. Nobody but Vazir was agile and strong enough to climb up that tree. He scraped the skin off the palm of his hand, but he managed to reach the cap and get it off. But, when he was climbing down, he fell heavily on a stone, hurting himself. However, he did not cry or whine, he merely said, like a grown-up, "Only he who does not walk does not fall!"

Gabdulla remembered how they had gone fishing together. Gabdulla himself never had much luck. By the time Vazir had caught several fish, Gabdulla had not even had a bite. All the same, when they were going home, Vazir divided the whole catch of big and little fish into two equal parts....

Then again, what happened last year! Some rotter had thrown a kitten into a deep well. The kitten had not been drowned. It managed to clamber up onto a damp ledge and sat mewing pitifully. They tried lowering the bucket on its rope, so that the kitten could jump into it, but it did not have enough sense to do that. Everybody, children and grown-ups, did their best to save the little creature, but without success. Then Vazir appeared with a long rope in his hand. He tied the rope a post and, without a sign of fear, climbed down into the deep, dark well. How frightened Gabdulla had been when Vazir, holding on with one hand, took the kitten off the ledge, placed it in the bucket and only then climbed up himself.

All those vivid memories came back to Gabdulla in a flash. Could it be the same Vazir, that brave friend, who now stood before his comrades with a hangdog expression, silently pleading forgiveness? Both Gabdulla and Aidar were ready to forgive him, but as the chieftain, Gabdulla considered that he had no right to be so tender-hearted and yielding towards a person who had tarnished the honour of the Tripod. "Must act tough in such cases!" Gabdulla told himself. So, looking stern, he asked in a cold indifferent voice:

"What do you want?"

"Nothing..." Vazir said timidly.

"Well, if you don't need anything, what are you hanging around here for?"

"I need you," Vazir murmured. His voice quavered and he began blinking even faster.

Yakup felt so sorry for Vazir that he had difficulty in holding back his tears. He could not imagine what wrong Vazir could have done, for he was always more alert and bold than any other boy. Why was Vazir, who had held the whole street in his hand, now in such a sorry state? Why had his comrades turned away from him?

Yakup fingered the red catapult in his pocket. With that Vazir could unfailingly hit any target. Yakup gazed at his friend with sadness and respect.

"Curse me, if you want to, beat me if you want to, only listen to me!" Vazir begged.

"All right, say your piece and be quick about it! We've got no time to waste," Gabdulla said gloomily.

"I've got something very good in the shed. Well, maybe it isn't so very wonderful.... Still, come and have a look...."

"Probably some trick," said Aidar suspiciously.

"No, it's no trick."

"What is it then?"

"Come and see for yourselves."

The three supports of the Tripod exchanged glances, but it was up to the chief, of course, to say the final word.

"If we do go, it'll only be because we want to test you. Look out! If you're up to any tricks, you'll only have yourself to blame!" And he shook his formidable fist at Vazir.

"Nothing of that sort! I tell you, you can cut me to bits, you can burn me...."

Gabdulla gave the order to the Tripod:
"Come on. Let's go and have a look!"

However, Vazir's invitation was not meant to include Yakup. He did not consider the Example worthy of such honourable company.

"You need not come, Yakup," he said.

Yakup looked at Gabdulla imploringly and the chief answered for him:

"No. Let Yakup go with us. He is our third support!"

Vazir's heart missed a beat, but he did not show it and said generously:

"All right. Let him come. I don't mind," but he began to make some rapid calculations in his head: if Gabdulla and Aidar got three honey-cakes each, then that would leave one each for himself and Yakup, but if they divided them among themselves equally, each boy would get two.

VAZIR'S SECOND MISTAKE

As soon as they entered the shed, Vazir began to feel more sure of himself. Even his voice sounded more cheerful. After all, say what you like, he was the one who was doing the inviting today!

"Lads," he said grandly, "I have a little treat for you. Although it is not much, accept it as it were!" Vazir had often heard his father pronounce those words when he had guests in the house.

The boys' eyes shone. What was Vazir going to treat them to? Yakup, who had a sweet tooth, even smacked his lips and swallowed. His mouth was watering.

"What I am going to offer you is nothing very special," Vazir said hurriedly because he felt so happy. "Now then, Yakup, hand over that cap of yours."

Yakup was wearing one of his father's old caps. Vazir took it and, going over to a dark corner, thrust his hand into the

space in the wattle wall and began to feel around. Three pairs of eyes followed his every movement.

"Aha! Got you, sweety!" Putting one honey-cake after another in the cap, Vazir continued: "I've caught you! One, two, three, four, five, six, seven and eight!... There are three each for Gabdulla and Aidar and one each for us two, so no one will take offence."

The treat seemed even better than the boys had been looking forward to. Besides, it was not often that they had such a pleasant surprise as an unexpected tuck-in of real honey-cakes! Yakup's mouth began watering and he swallowed. Anticipation was tickling the palates of the others, too.

Vazir picked up the cap with the precious honey-cakes. He considered that it would not be right to invite his guests to eat them in the shed. After all, they were not calves, to stand chewing in the dark in a shed!

"Let's go out behind this place," he suggested, "there's a nice comfortable spot there."

The guests did not have to be asked twice. They all knew that behind the shed there was a flat stone big enough to hold a banquet on. It was most convenient. Now the host would spread out the rich offering and the guests would not insist too long on Vazir's entreating them to eat. However, he, in the role of the generous host, would continuously entreat them not to stand on ceremony. Only in the case of Yakup he perhaps would not insist quite so much.

Is there anything in the world as satisfying as giving a treat to one's guests?

They trooped out behind the shed. Vazir, with a theatrical gesture, let the contents of the cap spill out onto the stone, while the cap itself he carelessly tossed to Yakup. But what had happened so suddenly to his guests? The smile that had been playing on their lips faded and a grimace took its place. Their eyebrows rose in amazement and their eyes, which had been gleaming with anticipation, lost their sheen.... What could have happened to the guests? Yes, and the host himself looked as if he had seen a ghost.... What could be the trouble?

The trouble was that there was not a single whole

honey-cake left. They had all been nibbled by the mice, some had been nibbled along one edge, others all over and some even had holes gnawed right through them. It seems that not only boys, but mice, too, are fond of honey-cakes. For two days the mice had been having a lovely feast!

"Perhaps you yourself would like to eat what the mice didn't finish off?" exclaimed the chief bitterly.

Vazir looked as if he had been struck by a bolt from the blue. All sorts of misfortunes can rain down on a person, but that so many misfortunes should descend on Vazir's head at one time was altogether too much!

"I only got them yesterday," he babbled in confusion. "If you don't believe me...."

Yakup tried to put the situation to rights: "They do say that if you eat what the mice leave, your teeth will grow strong."

But Aidar interrupted him sharply:

"Our teeth are already strong enough. We didn't grow up like you, with a lump of sugar between our teeth."

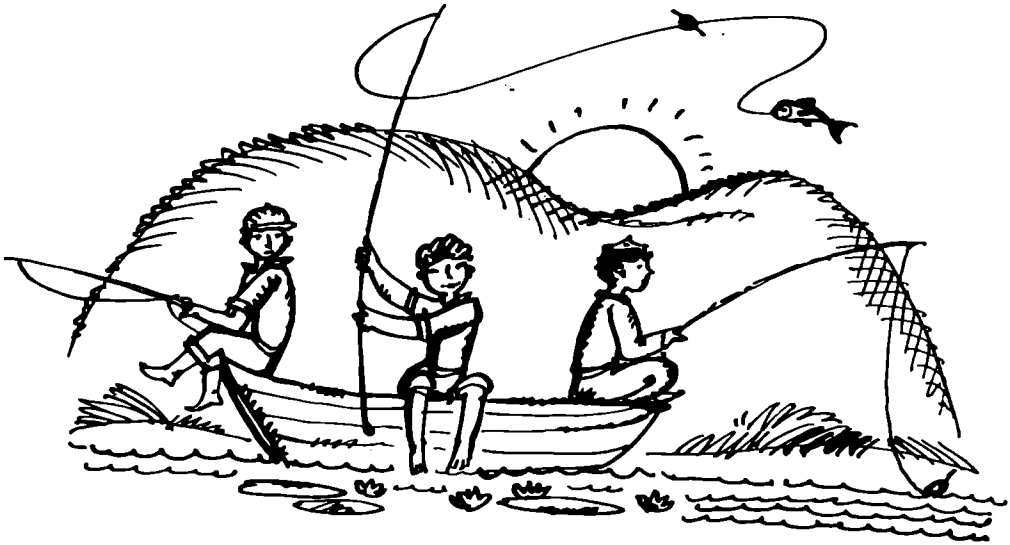
The boys were choking with rage. And with good reason! Anyone would be furious. After all they had been looking forward to a treat and that put them in a good mood.

"Thanks. We got more satisfaction out of the whole thing than out of a delicious treat," Gabdulla said and turning ordered the Tripod to get going at once.

The affronted guests walked slowly away. For a long time Vazir gazed at the honey-cakes spread out on the stone. Then he began to throw them one after another into the kitchen-garden, each time repeating frenziedly:

"Take that! And that! And that!"

To whom these words were addressed, to the mice, to his comrades, or to himself, was not clear. Having thrown away the last of the honey-cakes, he sobbed loudly, dropped onto the stone and burst into tears. Vazir wept for a long time. He had not shed tears for ages, but now he cried until there were no more tears left. How much he had suffered and all for nothing! He had taken his mother's money to buy honey-cakes for his friends, so as to look big and generous, but it had not worked.



FISH, YOU'RE HOOKED

Have you ever seen our Lake Kylys, Sword Lake, when day is breaking? I don't suppose you have. But if ever you do see that miracle, you will never forget it. I am not telling you this just to boast. We ourselves did not make Sword Lake, nor did we make the first light of day. That is nature's doing and all I can do is to take delight in such beauty and tell you about it, so that you might perceive, through my eyes, at least one tiny part of that beauty and know the joy of it.

The very first rays of the new day fall on the rocky slope behind Sword Lake. Then they scatter brightly to either side. However, the lake is still asleep, covered by a soft coverlet of milky-white mist. Even the light of daybreak cannot wake the slumbering lake. Quite the opposite, it snuggles down under an even thicker coverlet. The lake hides itself in this way, because in our mountainous parts the summer dawn is generally chilly. Only when the sun itself appears does our Sword Lake begin to gleam like a blade drawn from its sheath.

"You're oversleeping, O Kylys, O Sword Lake!" the Sun says reprovingly. "What have you been dreaming about?"

"When there is peace in the world the sword should rest in peace," the lake says jokingly. "My dreams were all sweet, thank you, Brother Sun!"

And the Sun goes on its way. He could never circle the whole world in one day if he were to stop for a long talk with everybody he met!

The sun rises ever higher and the water becomes more inviting and even more smooth. You feel you want to run barefooted over its mirror-like surface. When a new day is born, new happiness is born, too, and new hopes. Only the mist is sad and gloomy. But that is because it is so short-lived. Still, intertwining itself among the rushes and willows and even clinging to the broad leaves of the water-lilies, the mist tries to remain on the lake as long as possible. But it does not have much success. Mist cannot live long in the presence of the sun. Everybody knows that.

At daybreak, when the cocks began their discordant roll-call in the village, the three boys got into the boat and pushed off. That night Gabdulla and Aidar had slept together in the hayloft. Nobody had noticed them when they got up and went out. But Yakup did not manage to leave the house unnoticed. He woke up at the first gleam of day and lay for a long time quite still, listening to his mother's breathing. Then he began to dress very quietly, but he had hardly got one leg into his trousers before his mother woke up, too.

"Why are you stirring so early, son? Did you have bad dreams?"

"I did not dream at all. It's just that this morning I'm going fishing with the boys."

"You're going to fish? On the lake?" cried Gulemesh-apai, jumping out of bed.

"That is where the fish are, in the lake, Mum," Yakup said quietly.

"You keep your mouth shut! Whatever next?"

"I have promised my friends, Mum. And I cannot break a promise!"

"There are all sorts of promises, some you must not break and others are made to be broken. I won't let you set foot out of this house. So there you are!"

"Why should I be any worse than the others, Mum? Why can the others do things that I mustn't?"

"I don't care about the others! I have only one son," Gulemesh-apai cried indignantly.

Yakup recalled the threat he had already made use of once.

"Look, Mum, if you don't let me go with my friends, I shall get into Granddad's boat at once and I shall row far, far away on the lake. So now you know! You forbid me to do everything, but I'm almost grown-up now!"

Gulemesh-apai thought she was going to faint. What had come over the child? What foul fiend had cast the evil eye on her boy? The lad, who used to be as meek as a lamb, in a mere couple of days or so, had got utterly out of hand. "If I don't let him go now, he'll do what he wants, all the same," thought Yakup's mother, "and he might really get into that boat and sail away!" For some time she stood musing and then asked:

"Who are these friends of yours? That Vazir, I suppose...."

"They are Gabdulla and Aidar," Yakup stated proudly.

Having wrangled for quite a long time, Yakup's mother finally agreed to let him go. That was the first really great victory to Yakup's credit.

"But do take care. Don't you go taking any risks on the lake," Gulemesh-apai insisted as she saw her son off.

Soon Yakup was standing in the stern of the boat, paddle in hand. Gabdulla was sitting amidships, while Aidar had taken up his place at the prow. Yakup began to paddle quite vigorously. The boat moved smoothly over the lake and soon was lost to sight in the mist. Having reached the far end of the lake, the boys brought the boat to a stop among the rushes where they had hidden their fishtrap. Then they cast their fishing lines. By that time the sun had risen and the mist had lifted from the lake.

The fish began biting well at first. Aidar was lucky to hook eight carps, a couple of fairly big perch and one pike. Gabdulla managed to catch only small fish, still, there were six

or seven of those. Yakup's fish all got away, because he jerked his rod too hard as soon as they started to nibble at the bait.

Every fish they caught ended up in the sack made of fishing net which hung over the side of the boat in the water. Thinking that they had returned to the freedom of the lake, the fish began swimming and splashing around in it. When you are fishing you must not make a noise. In our parts when they cast their fishing lines, it is the custom for people to recite a magic spell. But that is not counted as making a noise.

"On my bait I have spat and hooked a fish so fine and fat!" Gabdulla chanted each time to his fishing tackle.

When Aidar pulled out a fish, first he spat on it, then he mumbled his incantation:

"Dear little fish, invite your mum, also tell your dad to come and your brother you should call, but call your sister first of all. Come on, fishes, don't be lazy, start to bite and bite like crazy!"

Yakup also chimed in:

"Take the bait that's on my line, hook, line and sinker on my line. If you do not take my hook, what a big fool you will look!"

Any fish would rather look a fool than be hooked. Not one of them yielded to Yakup's persuasion. They did not even lend an ear to him. Perhaps they might have lent him an ear, if they had an ear to lend.

The higher the sun rose, the fewer were the fish that bit. The fishermen moved their boat several times, but it seemed that the fish had got together and agreed not to swim anywhere near the fishing lines. It was useless to continue to cast their lines. All the fish that they had already caught had to be transferred to the fishtrap as quickly as possible, while they were still alive and in a good condition. Besides, hunger was making itself felt. Their tummies were rumbling.

Parting the rushes where the fishtrap was hidden, the boat ran its nose ashore. Gabdulla and Aidar took off their trousers and hurried out to the trap. There it was lying in the place where they had left it.... But wait a minute! The reeds around it seemed to be waving about. The boys froze where they

stood. Inside the trap big fish were splashing about. There were at least fifteen of them and perhaps as many as twenty! How did they get there? That was a mystery! The lid of the trap was closed, just as they had closed it themselves, so the fish could not have got in that way. So it must be the work of a human hand!

It does sometimes happen that someone takes fish out of another person's fishtrap. When Aidar and Gubdulla were still young and foolish, they themselves had taken a fish or two out of other people's nets a couple of times, and as for Vazir, well!... But never had they heard of anybody putting fish into a fish-basket that was not his own! Such a marvel was unheard of. There was not a soul in all Golden Eagle Village who would believe such a tale. If you tried to tell folk that such a wonderful thing really had happened they would call you a liar.

"There you are!" Gabdulla exclaimed. "As Granny says, that's miracle for you: if you're born to have riches, they will bring them right up to your doorstep! Oh well, a little extra something won't make a hole in your pocket!"

"Perhaps someone made a mistake," suggested Aidar, "and took our fishtrap for his own and put his fish in it?"

"Oh, go on! You just try holding your pocket wide open and see if anybody accidentally pops something into it."

"Well, if there is no mistake, then there must be some trickery behind this," Aidar again suggested uncertainly.

"You're always imagining all sorts of dirty doings," Gabdulla said with an ironical grin, although he was just as mystified as the others.

"Do you know who did it?" Yakup called to them from the shore where he was standing. "It was the wizard who always helps the fishermen!"

"What do you mean, wizard? And you are supposed to be a pioneer,"* said Aidar scornfully turning down that explanation.

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* *Pioneer*—a member of the Soviet schoolchildren's organisation.— *Tr.*

The lads were at a loss. Even their captain could not explain the mystery of how those extra fish had got into the fishtrap. So the puzzle remained unsolved.

Our fishermen had better luck next day, having caught nearly half a bucketful of fish. On the other hand, they were more uneasy than they had been the day before, because again there were extra fish in the trap, among them three golden carp. The boys were stricken dumb with amazement. Nobody knew whether to be glad or sorry. It would have been quite another matter if there had been *fewer* fish. Then they would just have said, "Ah, somebody has been poaching." Moreover, the suspicion would have fallen on Vazir first of all.

"Lads," said Yakup, "let's look at the bright side, let's just say we're lucky. We haven't stolen anything after all...."

"What you get without working for it must be counted as stolen," the chief concluded gloomily.

"Look," said Aidar firmly, "we know which of them are the fish we caught, so, all we have to do is to let all the others go, and that will be an end to the whole matter."

However, the boys could not make up their minds to put such a suggestion into practice. How could they just bring themselves to let so many gleaming, beautiful fish go free? It would be a stupid thing to do.

"Use your loaf," said the chief, "what have we been catching the fish for? We didn't do it so as to sling them on a sizzling frying-pan, did we?"

"We did not catch them so as to get our teeth into them and that's a fact," Aidar agreed, ruefully licking his lips.

"Well then, let them carry on swimming around in the trap. We'll see what to do with them later."

"If you chaps are afraid of committing a sin," Yakup suggested nobly, "let it be on my conscience, since I haven't caught a thing myself!"

"Yourself or ourselves doesn't come into it. What we do, we do all together and we answer for it together," interrupted Gabdulla sharply. "Everything is in common!"

Be that as it may, their mysterious discovery gave the boys

no peace. However, you must not think those fishermen were the kind that can be easily fooled.

On the third day they paddled the boat way out into the lake first of all, then they sent it nosing its way between the rushes and, to fool anybody who might be watching, started fishing. At last they climbed out onto the shore, pulled the boat up among the reeds and hid themselves among the tall rough grass, not far from the place where they had hidden their fishtrap. They had thought out this ruse the day before. They were impatient to discover the secret of the extra fish at any price.

The boys lay for a long time with their eyes fixed on the lake. But nothing so much as stirred in the vicinity. The brown heads of the rushes, the twigs on the trees and the stems of grass had not yet shaken off their early morning sleep. As for the birds twittering in the thickets, the boys paid no attention to them. They had no time for birds.

Then came the morning wind, sending ripples over the surface of the water, making the rushes rustle as if they were all grumbling at their neighbours saying, "What did you wake me up for?"

The breeze then flew off among the trees, stirring the leaves, but in spring the leaves are gentle and tender. They do not quarrel, but greet each other softly. The wind flew away and everything became quiet again. In the silence even the fluttering of the butterflies could be heard.

Two or, perhaps, even three hours passed. The boys had no watch. Children tell the time by their stomachs. If they are hungry it means it is time for breakfast, or dinner, or supper. The clocks within the fishermen's stomachs had told them long ago that breakfast-time had passed and they knew that now it was getting on for midday. In such cases patience has its limits.

"It's just a waste of time to lie here like this," said Yakup with a sigh of regret.

But Aidar slapped his *tyubeteika* cap over Yakup's mouth like a gag and shook his fist at him. So there was not another sound from Yakup.

Suddenly, quite near by, there was a slight creak. It was a sound known to every fisherman. Only rowlocks creak like that.... The boys pricked up their ears. They heard the rustling of reeds and the splashing of water. Whoever was approaching was up to no good! He was behaving too cautiously. The boys backed deeper into the rushes. Suddenly, rowing a boat as flat as a punt, Vazir came into view. He carefully looked around, then, making sure that there was not a soul anywhere near, he pulled his boat closer to the shore. A sack was tied at the rear of the boat so that it trailed in the water. Something was writhing and splashing in the sack. Vazir jumped out of the boat and, untying the sack, towed it to the place where the fishtrap lay.

Aha! So that was his little game. Vazir had not caught enough fish of his own, so he had decided to steal other people's fish! How mean could you get! But that Vazir wouldn't get away with it! Three pairs of sharp eyes followed his every step. Let him just try to touch that trap! The boys could hardly restrain their indignation. Just to think, that while somebody else was helping them, Vazir wanted to rob them!

Gabdulla and his comrades were imagining the unmasking and the shame of the thief, each one of them was thinking: "We'll show that Vazir, we will!" Only they had to wait so as to catch him red-handed.

Vazir carefully opened the lid of the fishtrap. He was standing with his back to the boys, so, no matter how much they wanted to, they could not see what he was up to. However, they did hear the splashing of the fish.... Aha! Wasn't he putting their fish, one by one, into his sack? Wasn't it high time for them to dash out of their ambush? Gabdulla saw the other two looking at him with the question in their eyes, but signalled to them to wait.

Vazir, having done what he wanted to do, closed the lid tightly and was about to make his get-away, when he heard Gabdulla's threatening shout from the shore:

"We've caught you, you thief!"

Vazir jumped and looked around. Seeing the three friends

coming straight at him, he began blinking rapidly and gave an uncertain grin. That grin made things worse. Raging and making a great splash, Gabdulla threw himself at Vazir and hit him in the face with all his strength. Aidar, coming close behind Gabdulla, did the same. Vazir seemed rooted to the bed of the lake and made no effort to defend himself.

"So you thought you'd feast on our fish, did you?" the captain shouted fiercely. "Take that, another fish in your face!" he cried, hitting out at Vazir again.

But Vazir ducked and pulled an empty sack out of the lake. Streams of water poured from the sack, but not a thing wriggled inside it.

"What have you done with our fish? You've let 'em out into the lake just for revenge, eh?" Gabdulla stepped up to him again.

"I've not let anything out! If you don't believe me take a look for yourselves."

Gabdulla and Aidar waded to the fishtrap. With difficulty they raised it, then, in confusion, they stared at each other: it was as full of fish as could be. There were many more than there had been last time....

"Where did you get them from?"

"I have my own fishtrap in a place where there are lots of fish," Vazir replied.

Yakup, who was still standing on the shore, clapped his hands with joy and even started to whistle. Meanwhile the fishtrap, now heavier than ever, slipped from the boys' hands and slowly sank....

Speechless with surprise, Gabdulla and Aidar gaped at Vazir. A red mark showed where the chieftain had struck him and his eyes were sad and reproachful. "Look what you've done!..." Vazir's eyes seemed to say, but, seeing how bewildered the lads looked, he suddenly squatted down and started to laugh heartily. He laughed so hard that his bare stomach shook until ripples spread out in rings on the water around him. Seeing those ripples, Aidar, too, began shaking with laughter. Soon Gabdulla joined in, too.

Up to the waist in water, the boys kept on laughing for a

long time, jumping around and shoving each other. If anyone had come along and seen them, he would have thought they were crazy. But the one who was happiest, the most delighted of all, was Yakup. Up until then he had been between the devil and the deep blue sea.

"Hurray!" he shouted. "Hurray! Everything has turned out fine!"

"And you put some fish in yesterday, too?" asked Gabdulla.

"Yes," nodded Vazir.

"And the day before?"

"Yes."

"Why did you do it?" the boys wanted to know as they waded ashore.

"Oh, I don't know — just so it would be filled up quicker...."

Vazir touched his cheek.

"You've got a hard fist, you have, Gabdulla!" he said with a grin.

"Oh, come off it!..." said Gabdulla, embarrassed because he knew how wrong he had been. "Let's forget about all that. Right? After all, you yourself...."

"Vazir certainly is a lucky fisherman," Yakup put in hurriedly, turning the conversation in a new direction. "Look what whoppers he has caught!"

"Oh, I chucked the little 'uns back...."

Meanwhile a brilliant idea had occurred to the captain.

"How many supports can the Tripod have?"

Quick-witted Aidar grasped what Gabdulla was aiming at immediately. "As many as you want. It all depends who is putting them there. You can put ten legs on it, if you want to!"

This time the chieftain did not issue an order, but, more modestly, decided to ask his comrades' advice. He felt uncomfortable at having hit Vazir without any real cause. He was so annoyed with himself that he felt unworthy of giving orders. After all, a leader should be more patient and keep himself in hand.

"Listen, lads," he said, "wouldn't it be fine if we took Vazir back into the Tripod? Those in favour raise your hand."

The three supports of the Tripod raised their hands. Vazir

was so touched by the kindness shown by his comrades, that he raised his, too. They were all very pleased, but did not want to show it. So the Tripod, having come through a lot of trouble, was again standing on firm legs, this time on four unshakable ones.

The boys wrung out their clothes and put them on straight away. Vazir was the first to be dressed, because he was wearing only a pair of trousers.

"Haven't you got another shirt?" asked Gabdulla with concern. "Do you go around without a shirt when it's raining?"

"I've got a shirt, it's in the trunk. I go around without it specially, so as to harden my muscles."

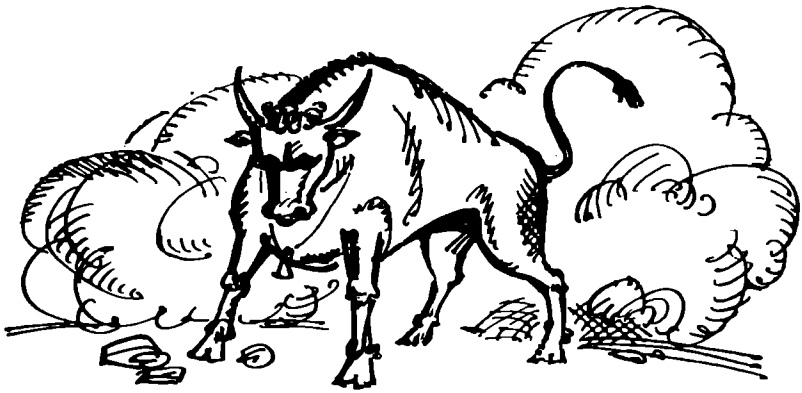
Not knowing that Vazir had decided to go in for that kind of physical training, his comrades glanced at him doubtfully.

On the way home the boys got down to daydreaming. The time was not far off when they would bring to life the lake on Peak Kiramet! They decided on the day after tomorrow. At the first light of day, before sunrise, they would set out on their long journey. In the meantime the two boats moved steadily side by side towards the village. When they were out in the middle of the lake a tuneful song rang out. It was Aidar singing. He always sang so well that his grandmother would say to him:

"You're such a songster, Aidar! Let's hope it won't bring you bad luck."

But why should Aidar have bad luck just for singing? If a person has a good voice, if people enjoy listening to his songs, if they bring comfort to people's hearts and consolation to those who grieve, surely that should be considered a great blessing. Now Aidar's song rang out over the smooth lake. It spread trilling over the shores and found a faint echo in the mountains.... Not only did that song go ringing out over the lake and shore, it also resounded in people's ears and reached their very hearts.

"Through the whole wide world they roam,
Seeing wonders far from home,
The brave djigit and his trusty steed...."



THE BULL

The herd of cattle, sheep and goats appeared on the outskirts of the village. Up ahead, with solemn gait, walked Granny Yamlegul's one-horned, piebald goat. She was the leader of the herd belonging to Golden Eagle Village. Not even the most skittish lamb would dare to overtake her in the pasture. Only when the herd was entering the village would the piebald goat step to one side, making way for the others. That is what the sheep would be waiting for and they always ran ahead bleating. Then the boys' shout rings out:

"The herd is coming! The herd is coming!"

The cry speeds along the street to the very end, from one yard to another. From every house someone comes out to meet the herd. If the folk who have no sons have not yet come home from work, then their neighbours' childern look after the animals. That has been the custom since the beginning of time in Golden Eagle Village. A medley of voices, of both children and adults, is heard as people call their animals by name.

On this day Gabdulla went out to meet the herd. His grandmother was not at home. Some time before that Yakup had come to visit him. He showed the chief the catapult Vazir

had presented him with. Until then Yakup had been afraid that his comrades would find out about his personal contact with Vazir. Now, however, he was happy about it. After all, they were friends again now and there was no need to keep his secret any longer, so he proudly pulled out his catapult. Gabdulla did not reprimand him. As a matter of fact he even had a world of praise when Yakup showed him how well he had learnt to shoot. The two boys went to meet the herd.

Having driven Gabdulla's cow and two sheep into the yard, they did not go straight into the house. Nobody ever does in Golden Eagle Village. Having met their own animals, people stand at the gates, watching the rest of the herd go by, ready to lend a hand to any neighbour, if need be, when some cow or sheep starts getting obstinate. All the shouting, mooing and bleating makes this time of the evening seem like a minor fair. Bringing up the rear, as if serving as an escort for the herd, about a hundred paces behind the laziest cow, comes the pale-brown bull from lower down the street. His eyes are as red as blood. They say that bull is fierce and, although he does not look so very big and terrible, as soon as the children spot him they skip out of the way. Some hide behind the gates, others clamber up onto the fence.

When the bull came along, Gabdulla and Yakup climbed up and sat on the fence, more out of habit than because they were afraid. Yakup took out his catapult and got a smooth pebble ready, just in case. You never know what tricks the devil might get up to.

It was then that the unexpected happened.

As the bull was passing the gates of Gabdulla's house, Gulnur came prancing out of the neighbour's front garden. She had just that minute returned from the dressmaker's wearing her new red dress. Happy as a lark, she was twisting and turning to the right and left, enchanted by the whirling flounces, delighted by the pretty buttons. Lost to all the world, she was crooning: "Oh, Gulnur! What a lovely dress you have! You ought to be ever so happy with your new dress. Let's hope it never wears out and will always be as pretty as now...."

Gulnur's dress really was something to attract attention. The brown bull, striding importantly down the middle of the street, naturally could not pass by without taking notice of that whirling red dress. Outraged, he stopped dead in his paces and his bulging eyes became more bloodshot than ever. Meanwhile the red dress span around ever faster, infuriating him with its fine frills as red as fire. The bull lowered his heavy head with its great horns and slowly moved towards the little girl.

"Run, Gulnur, run!" yelled Gabdulla. She was surprised and raised her head. In spite of this, there was still nothing in the whole wide world for her but that beautiful red dress. So she did not notice the danger she was in. Meanwhile the bull had jumped over the deep ditch beside the road and, lowering his head even more menacingly, with a bellow he charged Gulnur. The child's terrified screams rent the air and the bull saw the red dress dashing from side to side. At any moment it seemed those horns, as hard and sharp as steel, would gore her, that she would be thrown to the ground and crushed beneath those dreadful hooves.

"Mummy! Mummy!"

Gabdulla dropped like a plummet from the fence. Snatching the little girl from under the very horns of the bull, he threw her over the fence onto the flower beds. In a flash the enraged bull rushed at Gabdulla. The boy had no time to dodge and, caught between the horns, he was tossed high into the air and flopped down onto a big and sharp stone. The bull drew back and, pawing the earth with his hooves, charged his victim with even greater fury, but in that very moment the pebble Yakup shot from his catapult struck the bull in the eye. The animal shook his head with rage and pain, whirled round and round in one spot and then charged off down the street.

All this had happened in a moment. People came running from every side. Gabdulla lay doubled up. His white face seemed lifeless. He tried not to groan, biting the shirt he had stuffed into his mouth. Having chased the bull farther down the street, people gathered around Gabdulla. Somebody tried to lift him to his feet, but he cried out in pain:

"My arm! My arm!" From the corner of his mouth a thin thread of blood ran down his chin.

Seeing this Gulnur gave a terrified screech.

"Don't squeal!" said Aidar as he appeared on the scene.

The people who had gathered round were talking all at once, each trying to express his sympathy and to tell the others what ought to be done. Some of them cursed the bull, others blamed the bull's owner.

"A bull takes after the man who owns it!"

"That's right and the owner is a snake in the grass!"

"He's a brave boy, that Gabdulla, a real *djigit*, saving the little girl!"

"What a thing to happen, poor lad, injured like that without a word of warning!"

"Don't stand there gabbling. Do something!"

"There's only one thing to do, and that's to get him to the hospital as soon as possible!"

"How can we send him? Right now there's not a lorry or car in the village."

"Yaumbaev, go and harness the horses, at the double!"

Yakup and Aidar gazed at their chief in silence. Tears were trickling down Yakup's face. Aidar was more restrained. Then Vazir came trotting down the street with never a care. He nosed his way through the crowd and, seeing Gabdulla lying on the ground, gasped. Then he shouted wildly:

"What are you all standing around for? Got to get him to the hospital!" He pushed his way out of the crowd and ran down the street. "Got to get a horse! A car! I'll fix everything!"

However, Sharifulla forestalled him and, stopping one of those springless carts called a tarantass that happened to be passing, led the elderly man who was driving it over to the crowd.

"Look, the boy's been hurt by the bull."

"The bull. The bull tossed him."

"Got to get him to the hospital!" everybody shouted at once, each trying to outdo the others.

"The lad was standing by his gate and along comes this little girl in the red dress.... The bull just charged at her...."

The driver who had been passing through the village did not wait to learn the details:

"Carry the lad over to the tarantass," he ordered.

The crowd milled around, but made way, while somebody with loving hands spread hay thickly on the floor of the cart. Sharifulla, who had carefully picked the boy up, now laid him on the soft bed of hay. Gabdulla made a great effort not to groan. He bit on the bunched-up shirt, but the dark shadows under his eyes and his bloodless face proved more clearly than any groan could what great pain he was in.

His friends, having elbowed their way up to the side of the cart, looked at their chief with fear and hope, ready at his first call to leap to his aid and to take his suffering upon themselves.

"Well, we must get going. Who's coming along with me?" asked the driver.

"We are ... let us go with you! He's our friend!" the lads implored. However, Sharifulla had already climbed up beside the driver.

"His grandmother isn't at home.... And unless I come along nobody will do anything right! Come on, let's get going."

The cart slowly made its way along the village street. It had a long way to go, more than twenty-five kilometres, about fifteen miles, to the village of Kultaban. It seemed to the boys frightful and unbelievable that Gabdulla, who only a little while ago had been jumping and running around on his own two legs, going to the lake with them and giving orders in a clear, ringing voice, should now be lying like a sack of oats on that cart. It was unbelievable! To think that Sharifulla himself should be taking him away to some far-off hospital. The lads stood at the entrance to Gabdulla's house and for a long time gazed at the road which was lost in the distance among the mountains.

They looked as forlorn as little baby sparrows whose mother has been stolen away by the cat.

THE LETTER

After Gabdulla was taken away, the boys no longer went fishing, but every day they did visit the fish in their big wickerwork cage and gave them food.

The days passed. Everything got back into its old rut, except that the bull was no longer to be seen. People had made a fuss and told the animal's owner:

"If you don't have it slaughtered for meat, we'll have the law on you."

So he was forced to do what they demanded.

Another important event took place, too. Aidar fulfilled his promise to his sister Gulnur. In a garret at the farm he found a sparrow's nest and took two fledglings that Gulnur was easily persuaded were skylarks. Her brother was making a cage for them, but Gulnur let them go free before he had time to finish it.

There was news for Vazir, too, well, something new, anyway. His mother had made him a yellow satinet shirt, but he did not put it on, waiting for the *Sabantuy* holiday. Yakup's

old bruises and bumps were gone and new ones took their place, since he was still determinedly outliving his model behaviour. There probably was not a single tree in the village, or near it, that Yakup had not climbed. There was not a rock he had not scaled, not a hole or ditch he had not jumped over. Even his mother had got used to that kind of thing.

Of course, news of what had happened to Gabdulla reached the summer pasture where his mother was working. Next day, weeping and worried to death, she came tearing into the village on horseback. Then, without even unsaddling the horse, she went galloping off to Kultaban. Nobody in the village so much as caught a glimpse of her, except Gabdulla's old grandmother who had been crying her eyes out. Only after seeing her son alive she calmed down somewhat. Gabdulla had two broken ribs and his left arm was broken, too.

"Young bones soon mend," the doctor declared and went on to praise Gabdulla: "He's a patient and game lad, your son is. He'll grow up to be a real *djigit.*"

So Gabdulla's mother dried her tears and thought: "He's the image of his father! Bold and brave.... Without a second thought he rushed at the bull to save that little girl."

Gabdulla's behaviour lent courage to his mother, too. She did not cry when saying goodbye to him. What she did was to tell her companions at the summer pasture all about him, adding affectionately:

"My boy takes after his father...."

Gabdulla's name was on the lips of all the villagers, young and old. Gulnur's mother went from house to house declaring with tears in her eyes:

"For all eternity we shall be in debt to that child. My little girl wouldn't be alive today if it weren't for Gabdulla."

She began to put aside eggs and butter because she was dreaming of treating the lad to the very tastiest dishes as soon as he came home.

Grandmother Nagima, who was used to facing up to all sorts of difficulties and adversities in life without saying a word, kept herself firmly in hand and did not let people see

how deeply she was suffering, yet when she was alone she wept for the boy.

"They've taken my Gabdulla away. Oh, what tortures he must undergo, poor little chap! As long as I do not lose my only grandson, the joy of my life...."

Nevertheless, no matter how much she wept, Nagima never forgot every Thursday to polish the medal won by her son Muhammed.

After ten days Grandmother Nagima received a letter from Gabdulla, and although she could not read, she had not the patience to wait and opened the envelope. Taking out the letter, she held it up to the light looking at her grandson's uneven writing. Only after that did she invite Gabdulla's three friends for the reading of the letter. Yakup read better than the others and his audience sat decorously and in silence on the benches, listening. Yakup decided to read the letter standing up. Clearing his throat to lend the occasion the right atmosphere, he began in a solemn voice:

"Greetings to you. Write to me too.

"Dear and most respected Granny!

"You ask why I did not write until now. Here's why. It turns out that I broke two ribs and my left arm. Besides I was lying here for three days coughing up blood. I expect my liver and lights were jerked free and bounced up to my throat. But now they're back in their places. I was put to bed and they wouldn't let me get up even to do number two. I thought I would die of shame! They put a lot of white clay on my left arm and it got hard right away. I've tried raising my arm but it is ever so heavy. My arm does not hurt any more, but it itches like anything under the clay. And when I breath my ribs on the left hurt. But it is not as bad as it was and I try to be careful how I breathe.

"They took away my trousers and shirt and gave me some great big white pants and a white shirt. The nurse tied the pants up with a long narrow strip of cheese-cloth that they bind up wounds with. It is very hot in the hospital here. They hang cheese-cloth over the windows so the flies won't get in, but they get in, anyway. After meals they give us sweet water

with all sorts of berries in it. It's called 'compote'. It's very tasty, this 'compote'."

As he read this, Yakup could not help smacking his lips.

"The doctors are very kind here, Granny. The very chief doctor always smiles when he comes into the ward. He always has a kind word for me and jokes, asking:

"'Hi there! How goes it, *batyr*?'

"They cut my hair with clippers. They did not hurt a bit, those clippers, not like when Allabirdeh used to shave my head in the village. That made me see stars!

"There are three of us in this room. The man whose bed is near the window has his guts all glued up, because, instead of vodka, he went and drank liquid glue by mistake, the stuff they stick papers together with. The one who is next to the radio set was crushed by a tree in the forest and bit his tongue, so now he cannot talk.

"I'm already fed up with this place. I am afraid that without my village I'll get so sick and tired of it I'll really get ill. If only they would give me back my trousers and shirt, I'd run away from here and come home.

"Granny, I expect Aidar and Yakup will read this letter to you. When they do read it, tell them to go to look after our fish very often and feed them. If they don't the fish will die of hunger. I forgot to ask Mum how Gulnur is. She didn't break any arms or legs, did she?

"Granny, I've been saving up to make you a little present. I've already got eleven biscuits, eight sweets and ten pieces of sugar. Please don't think that I am going short. These are things that are left over.

"To end my letter I ask you pass on my best wishes to our relations and friends. And all the best to you, Granny, and to Mum and to Vazir and Aidar and Yakup a special greeting. Anyway, now you don't have to worry about me, Granny. The doctor says: 'There never was a *batyr* who wasn't wounded!'

"So now I am ending my letter. Addressed to Grandmother and sent by Gabdulla. 9th of July, 1950."

Having listened to the letter, Grandmother Nagima held the empty envelope out to Yakup.

"Sonny, have a look what it says on the back of this paper."

Yakup read out:

"This envelope was given to me by the man who drank the glue. The stamp was already there on the envelope."

Grandmother Nagima, on listening to the letter, had been recalling all the twelve years of her grandson's life. It seemed only such a short while ago that he first was able to stand up all alone, when he ventured to make his first steps, how she had waited for the time when he would begin to talk, then, when he would be going to school.... Now he had written such a fine letter to her from the far-off village of Kultaban.

That was the very first letter Gabdulla had ever written by himself.

THE REPLY

They decided not to put off answering the letter. The first thing Granny Nagima did was to give Aidar the money to buy an envelope and stamp from the postman. From one of Gabdulla's partly filled copybooks they tore out a clean page, but there was neither pen nor ink in the house. The chieftain's things were always in a mess. Yakup had to run home for a pencil.

Vazir's handwriting was thought to be the best, so he wrote the letter. Of course, Vazir did not make it up out of his own head. He put down everything in the strict order in which Granny Nagima dictated it to him.

"'Reverend and Dear Grandson Gabdulla....' Have you put that down?" asked Granny.

Vazir scratched his head:

"As for getting it down on paper, yes, I've done that, but what about this word 'Reverend'? Does it have two *r*'s in it, or is one enough?"

"Write as many as are needed. It's better to have an extra one than not enough. So put two in!"

"But what does the word 'Reverend' mean?"

"I am not too sure myself, sonny, but you can't begin a letter without that word. It wouldn't be right. And don't you be so inquisitive, just write down what you're told. Now, let's begin from the beginning!"

"'Reverrend and Dear Grandson Gabdulla!

"'Before I speak my cherished word to you, I send kind regards and best wishes from your Granny, who always has her eyes turned in the direction of Kultaban, where you are in hospital, and who awaits your earliest return. And kind regards from your mother who is now working as a milkmaid out on the summer pastures on the bank of the Ural River and who night and day thinks about nothing but you. Yes, and kind regards and best wishes from Granny Yamlegul, who was the midwife who brought both your father and mother into this world and who enjoys honour and respect in her own home and throughout the village. Greetings to you from Granddad Allaberdy's whole family, he was your grandfather's companion when they went hunting. Best wishes and greetings from Sharifulla himself, who did not grudge his time, more precious than gold, and who willingly undertook the trouble of looking after you, and, doing you honour by his grey hair, took you to the hospital and carried you in his own arms and himself handed you over to the doctor. Greetings and best wishes from your father's very best friend, Sakhipgarei-the-Lame who works in the farm office. Likewise greetings from all our neighbours on whom depend the peace and well-being of our family. With that I end the good wishes and greetings.'"

"But what about us?" Yakup asked.

Granny Nagima immediately realised she had not been thoughtful and hurried to put things right:

"Add before the words 'I end' 'Greetings and very best wishes from your friends Vazir, Yakup and Aidar, with whom you grew up, playing and enjoying yourself. That's the end of the greetings....'

"'Gabdulla, my little grandson!'" she continued. "'Your letter, which is more precious than gold and more lovely than silk, arrived at midday on the twelfth of July, 1950, and was read several times over from the first to the last line. Your comrades Aidar, Yakup and Vazir were with me at the reading of it. It turns out that my heart was right in being pained, sensing the pain in your precious bones. What is to be done? Let us hope that everything will turn out all right. How many people you have shielded from bitter sorrow by saving the life of one innocent child! If that cursed bull had killed that child under your very eyes, your heart would have known no peace. You would have blamed yourself for cowardice and your soul would have pined away for shame. The suffering of the soul is worse, by far, than the suffering of the body, for the ills besetting the flesh will pass, while remorse and other ills besetting the soul remain forever. Now you keep to your bed quietly and listen to what your doctors tell you. As soon as you are well again let us know at once by the telephone line. The chairman of the collective farm himself has said that he is going to send a fiery horse for you, like those trotters that were harnessed only to the carriages of governors in days of old.

"'You write that your arm itches. Perhaps you ought to go to the steam-bath and whack it with birch twigs with leaves on them. Ask your doctor to tell them to heat up the bathhouse. Only the steam should not be too hot. I thank you for the present you have saved up for me. However, it was your words that meant more to me than any present could. And when things get very dull, you must eat up those nice things yourself, just as if your Granny had sent them to you herself. I wanted to send you a jar of cream and a dozen eggs, but the chairman talked me out of it, saying that they give you plenty of food at the hospital.

"'You ought to know that everything in our household is in

good order. The animals and the fowl are doing well. The chickens are laying and the speckled hen has hatched out ten chicks. The cow is also giving more milk. The other day Granny Yamlegul and I decided to give ourselves an airing and walk through the fields. There is a good standing growth of fine wheat. Everything is getting along all right and we live in peace, only the bathhouse belonging to Amirkhan, who lives down the road, has burnt down. We are looking forward to seeing you well again. I have been thinking things over and have decided that when you do return, I shall give you your father's medal to wear a whole day long. You will pin it on your chest, because you, my grandson, have performed such a deed as to earn you the right to wear your father's medal, and for more than one day, at that!

"'You ask about Gulnur. She is alive and as happy as the day is long. Ending this letter, which is no longer than a little bird's tongue, I wish that all the roads you follow through life may be bright ones. With greetings, ever your Granny.'"

At last Granny Nagima gave a sigh of relief and nodded to Vazir:

"You can glue it up now."

"What? And the fish! What about them?" the boys asked anxiously.

"What is all this about fish? I wanted to ask you before, but forgot."

The boys looked at each other.

"That's a secret, Granny."

"Well, since it's a secret, think up what to say out of your own heads. What with your secrets and mysteries there'll be no end to it!"

The boys winked at Vazir and he added a short note:

"Gabdulla, don't you worry about the fish. They are safe and sound. Come home soon.

"This letter was dictated by your Granny and taken down by Vazir."

Vazir wrote the address on the envelope in fine block letters and even underlined the words: "For Gabdulla Yulamanov".

"Granny," Yakup suggested, "what if I run and drop it into the letter-box."

"I thank you, children, but I shall post it myself when I go out. I have to go that way in any case." Granny Nagima took six eggs out of a basket behind the stove and gave two to each of the boys.

The lads would rather not have accepted them, but did not dare refuse, because you must not seem to be above accepting a gift. If you fail to observe that custom in Golden Eagle Village, you would be considered overweeningly arrogant.

"Yakup, come back in a little while and read me the letter again," Granny Nagima said, seeing the boys off.

When they had left she took out of her trunk her long dress of many colours and her old-fashioned green velvet embroidered tunic. She dressed herself in this holiday attire and put a new cashmere shawl over her hair. Granny Nagima did not really have to go anywhere. She just wanted to post the letter to Gabdulla with her own hands. For her it was such a happy and important event that she donned her holiday attire.

Having reached the club, Grandmother Nagima saw the letter-box to the right of the door. But what a poor lot the people from the post-office were, to be sure! The box was covered with a thick layer of dust. At first she tried blowing it off, but, seeing that this did no good, she took a handkerchief out of her tunic pocket and hurriedly cleaned every speck of dust off the letter-box. Only then, raising the cover of the narrow slot, did she finally drop her precious letter into the box.

Well, that was that! However, Granny Nagima felt no urge to go. She stood for some time looking at the letter-box. She stroked it with her warm old hands and whispered:

"May the wings of a bird speed my letter!"

THE HIGHWAY

You can always find a solution to any problem, if you only put your mind to it. One evening when the boys were grazing their cows and, as usual in those days, talking about Gabdulla, suddenly a brilliant idea entered their heads at one and the same time — they ought not to wait until Gabdulla came out of the hospital, but the very next day they should go to visit him themselves! As things stood now, here were they free as the air, running around and having a good time! What sort of friendship was that? To be sure they ought to go and see Gabdulla without delay! How was it that such a simple thought had not come into their heads before? On returning home, all the three boys informed their mothers that at break of day they were going to set out on their journey.

On hearing Gabdulla's name, not one of the mothers tried to put a stop to the venture. Gulemesh-apai agreed without

too much wavering and Aidar's mother was even glad to let him go.

"You should have gone long ago! Always hanging around here wasting your time!" she said and, from the small store of food she had for the family, she gave her son some eggs and butter for Gabdulla.

Yakup's mother added a jar of honey and some wheat-cakes. Kurbanbika's offering was a large piece of blackcurrant-flavoured soufflé.

"Let him eat it with his tea," she said, "currants ease the pain in one's bones."

Aidar, who had taken over the post of captain for the time being, gave various orders to his companions the evening before. Yakup, who had more clothes than the others, was told to put on two pairs of trousers and two shirts. He tried to argue:

"It'll be too hot."

"You'll live through it."

"But why do I need two pairs of trousers and two shirts?"

"Could come in handy," was the laconic reply.

This was an occasion when Vazir had to wear his new yellow shirt. It would not look right to make such a long journey to a strange village without a shirt on his back. There are limits to everything.

When the sun first peeped over the horizon, the three boys, bundles in their hands, were already on their way. At first they stepped out quite merrily and even raced each other downhill. But the higher the sun rose, the slower became the pace of the wayfarers. Finally they called a halt beside a cold mountain stream from which they drank. But water alone did not help. They were already very hungry.

"Time for grub, lads, got to keep up our strength," was Vazir's timely suggestion and the other two had no objections.

The boys sat on the bank of the stream and got down to "keeping up their strength" with a will, only nobody noticed that they had finished off their day's rations at one sitting.

"It doesn't matter," Aidar said when the meal was over. "We're keeping our reserves in our bellies, that's all!"

After another drink of water, the lads set out again. The road was deserted, not a lorry or horse passed the travellers. Having crossed the mountains and forest, they came out onto the highway running over the steppeland. Vazir had been to the bazaar at Kultaban twice with his father the year before, so he knew the way. When the boys had reached the halfway point on their journey a lorry with a trailer overtook them. It was loaded with lengths of timber fastened tightly with chains.

The three of them raised their hands. The lorry came to a stop and the driver, a young fellow, opened the cabin door.

"Where are you heading for, *djigits*?"

"To Kultaban," they answered in chorus.

"And what do you want there?"

"A friend of ours is in hospital there. The bull tossed him. We're going to visit him. Give us a lift, *agai*."

"You're a bit heavy, you are!" joked the driver. "Well, all right, if the engine can take it!"

"It'll pull all right. The road is flat and we don't weigh much," Yakup assured him.

"Well, what's to be done? If you don't weigh much, jump in! Only two will fit into the cabin, though. One of you will have to climb up behind."

"All three of us will get up behind, *agai*!"

"Just as you like. Only, look out, don't you go fooling around up there, or you'll fall off. Then the trouble I'd have because of you would be a heavier load than you are!" said the driver sternly.

The boys climbed onto the lorry in a flash. Their tired, dusty faces took on a rosy hue and their spirits rose at once. The motorway through the plain was flat and smooth. The lorry rocked and swayed comfortingly as it drove on. There were fine fields of corn on either side of the road. A gentle breeze played, making the young ears of wheat sway, while in the distance, the mountains could be seen through a blue haze. Golden Eagle Village was hidden somewhere back there among the mountains. From the mountain slopes tall columns of smoke rose where the herdsmen had their campfires on the summer pastures. High above all the other mountain peaks

rose Peak Kiramet, shining white. Folk in our parts are quite right in calling Kiramet the king of the mountains!

The boys were very interested in these new and unknown places. Aidar's heart was so full that he began singing his favourite song:

"Though I'm so tired I trip and fall,
To reach my homeland I shall crawl...."

The song made them forget about everything else in the whole wide world. Aidar was no longer aware that he had a bundle in his hand and that, if he beat time with that bundle, it was sure to hit something hard. Soon the yolk of egg was seeping through the white cloth. It would seem that the eggs, intended as a gift for Gabdulla, were unusually fragile. However, neither Aidar nor his comrades noticed anything and the sun and wind soon dried the yellow stains, so keeping the mishap a complete secret. Just before they reached Kultaban, the driver stopped the lorry.

"I'm going straight ahead, without driving through the village. Don't be upset, lads. You've only got a little way to walk," he said, sticking his head out of the window. Then, smiling, he added: "Thanks for the entertainment. Time went by so fast I hardly noticed it. Which of you is the good singer, eh?"

"That's him," said Yakup, proudly pointing at Aidar.

"Good for you, boy!" exclaimed the driver.

The lads jumped off the lorry.

"Thank you, *agai*!" they shouted, all trying to thank the driver at the same time.

Aidar, deeply moved, wanted to present the driver with a couple of eggs from Gabdulla's bundle, but was too shy to do so. "What if he refuses to take them? I would feel ashamed," he thought. So he hid the bundle behind his back and repeated: "Thank you, *agai*!"

"Don't mention it. I enjoyed myself listening to you. So long, boys! Just keep straight on down the main street. The hospital is at the other end of the village." The driver nodded at them and drove away.

The hospital was quite close. Having got to the middle of the village, the boys stopped at a stream, shook the dust out of their clothes and had a good wash. After all they were not heading for a barn-yard. They were going to visit a hospital. You have to have the right approach in every case.

The hospital was a wooden building with a spacious porch. An elderly woman in a white smock was sitting on the porch. She had a ball of wool on her lap and was knitting a shawl. To the rear of the yard there was another wooden building and near it a young woman was sitting on a bench breast-feeding her baby. Under a spreading pine-tree two men were sitting on the grass. Washing was hanging on a line strung between two poles in the yard. Without stopping her knitting for a single moment, the woman on the porch would glance once in a while at the washing. She seemed to be keeping an eye on the goats grazing nearby. Goats are very fond of linen, you know.

"*Apai!*" Vazir addressed the elderly woman politely. "We have come to visit our friend. His name is Gabdulla Yulamanov."

"Yulamanov has taken a turn for the better. He is in ward number four. Only you can't go in now, this is the patients' rest period. Later he will come out himself to see you. That is the rule around here."

That rule was not to the liking of the lads. They had not come all this long way just to sit around and wait till the patients had got through their rest period.

"*Apai*, let us in..." Yakup began pleading. "We'll creep into the ward ever so quietly, on tiptoe!"

"You mustn't go into the wards, even on tiptoe! Run along, run along now. Come back later," the woman said in a firm voice.

"We've come from ever so far away, *apai*.... We're from Golden Eagle Village."

"It makes no difference whether you are from Golden Eagle Village or from Black Raven Village. When I tell you you can't go in, you can't!"

The boys left the yard and lay down in the shade of a big birch-tree.

"Things don't look so good! A day wasted!" Aidar said.

"Yes, our trip didn't turn out right. A day wasted!" Yakup sighed.

"If you sit around moaning, nothing will ever turn out right. We've got to think up something!" Vazir declared.

The boys drew closer together and, in conspiratorial whispers, they decided upon a course of action. Again they entered the hospital yard. The elderly woman in white was still sitting on the porch knitting the shawl, her needles clicking at great speed.

"Time passes very slowly," Vazir said, stretching. "We're not used to sitting around doing nothing.... Could you find some job for us to do here, *apai*? Rather than lying around yawning we'd like to be up and doing something."

"There's always plenty of work for those who aren't afraid of it," answered the woman without raising her eyes.

"You just tell us what you want done and the three of us will do it in a jiffy."

"Oh, well," said the woman, unexpectedly mollified, "if you really feel like it, the clothes on that line are quite dry by now and I'm in a hurry to get this knitting done. If you would take down the washing and carry it over to the shed there, I would be very grateful...." The woman smiled. "You know the saying—'A word of thanks saves you from a thousand misfortunes'? So go on, get down to work if you want to. Only don't you go dropping that linen!"

"*Apai*, we shall be very, very careful...."

The boys got down to the job at once. Trying to please the stern-looking woman, they carefully unpegged the washing, took it off the line and carried it over to the shed.

"Some children are so very good!" thought the woman, looking at the lads. "Now my boy, he doesn't even do the things he ought to. He simply won't work. But these children are eager to."

The woman was loud in her praises when there was no more washing left on the line:

"Oh, thank you all! What helpful children you are. Thanks again, boys!"

"We have heard your many words of thanks, *apai*, and may they save us from just one misfortune — we cannot wait to see our friend!" Aidar said.

"Oh, what cunning little things you are! And it never occurred to me!" the woman laughed. "Still what's to be done? If the doctor sees you, you'll be in trouble, you will!"

"Oh, he won't catch us, *apai*, we're not afraid of that!"

"Wait! Not all three of you. I can't let you all in!"

"Oh, just let two of us in. Look, this one," Aidar said, jerking Vazir's sleeve, "he'll stay out here in the yard."

"All right. Only make sure nobody hears you!" The woman glanced around and added: "Ward number four, the second door to the right, as you go in...."

Aidar and Yakup tiptoed through the door and, trying to make no noise at all, carefully closed it behind them.

Vazir sat down next to the woman knitting on the porch.

"Who are you making such a beautiful shawl for?" he inquired slyly.

"Oh, my daughter asked me to. She has no time. She's busy all day long looking after the calves," the woman explained willingly.

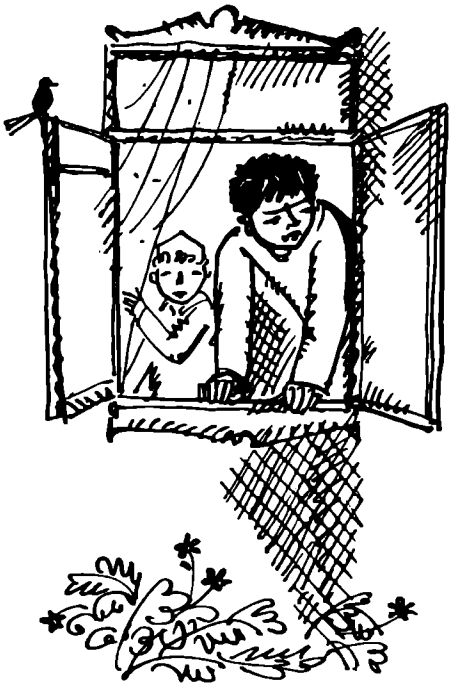
"My mother works on a chicken farm," Vazir said, anxious to keep the conversation going.

"Do her chickens lay well?"

"You bet. Each one better than the next. They lay eggs faster than you can pick 'em up!"

"Goodness gracious me!"

The woman in white turned out to be very talkative and, as the conversation got more and more lively, she began to indulge in confidences, starting to go through the list of everything she had done in her life. She had knitted shawls. She had built stoves. She had made felt boots and sewn dresses. Moreover, she had acted in the theatre and, when she was young, she had taken part as a horsewoman in the equestrian events at the *Sabantuy* alongside the *djigits*.... That's the kind of tomboy she had been! Vazir showed his amazement and did nothing but ask more questions. He used all his wits to keep the interesting conversation going.



UNEXPECTED VISITORS

Gabdulla was lying on his bed and, to pass the time, he was counting the flies on the ceiling, when Yakup and Aidar came in. Gabdulla started with surprise and rubbed his eyes. The two boys also felt at a loss and stood as if rooted to the spot.

"So you've come, have you?" Gabdulla said, dumbfounded.

"We've come all right. Are you better?"

"I'm better."

"Does your arm hurt you?"

"Not any more."

The boys shook hands in turn with the invalid.

"How d'ye do, Gabdulla!"

"How d'ye do!"

"Why didn't Vazir come, too?"

"He did come. Only they wouldn't let him in. He's out in the yard."

"We've brought you some presents. The sweet stuff is from Vazir," Aidar explained, handing Gabdulla the bundle.

"Thanks for the presents. Only I can't eat a thing. Got no appetite. I want to go home. Is Granny all right? What about the fish? Are they still alive?"

"I'll say they are! Alive and kicking! When are they going to let you out?"

"In ten days, they say. In a week they are going to take this clay off."

"Oho!"

"If I'd got some trousers, I'd have done a bunk through the window long ago. But they won't give me my trousers back," Gabdulla said with regret, walking over to the window which opened onto the woods and was covered with gauze. "Not a soul would notice. I'd just take this cheese-cloth off and you wouldn't see me for dust!"

"As for clothes, we've brought 'em!" Aidar said merrily. "Yakup's wearing two of each!"

The boys wasted no words. Off came Gabdulla's hospital outfit and the two visitors helped him to pull on his trousers. The sleeve of Yakup's shirt proved too narrow for Gabdulla's arm in its plaster cast, but the boys were not at a loss. With a ripping sound Yakup tore the sleeve from shoulder to cuff, saying:

"When we get home Mum will sew it up."

The biscuits and sweets Gabdulla had been saving for his grandmother they stuffed into the bundle in which they had brought him presents. Aidar carefully removed the gauze from the window. When they were prepared to jump out, Gabdulla asked them to wait.

"It wouldn't be right to leave without even saying goodbye!"

Taking a pencil and paper from the night-table, he wrote a short note:

"Dear Doctor,

"Thank you very much. I am quite better now. And I am going home to the village. My friends brought me some clothes. In a week, when the clay has to come off, I shall come back all right. Please do not be angry with me.

"Gabdulla Yulamanov"

The sill of the window was not far from the ground. Aidar was the first to jump. Then Gabdulla let himself down carefully. Putting both arms round Gabdulla's legs Aidar lowered him to the ground. Yakup was the last to jump. On landing he knocked his knee on the hard root of a pine. It hurt a lot, but Yakup didn't make a sound.

Having looked around carefully, the boys made a break for the woods. When they reached a place well out of sight, they stopped and Aidar gave a long, drawn-out whistle, just like a bird's call. To the sharp ears of the waiting Vazir, that call was sweet music. However, he did not jump up the moment he heard his companions' signal.

"I must go over there behind that bush," he said calmly.

But the woman sitting next to him by that time was carried away with what she was telling him about the latest play she and her group had put on at the club.

"You just wait a minute and I'll finish telling you about it."

"Well, I've seen that play in our village. They put it on at our club, too," Vazir said impatiently.

"Why didn't you say so right away? I'd have told you about something else. You just listen, I'll tell you about the play in which the rich landowner's son...."

The call of the bird again reached them from the woods.

"Isn't it lovely in the summer-time?" sighed the woman in white, "my heart simply melts when I hear the birds singing!"

"Oh, oh! I've got a belly-ache!" Vazir suddenly groaned.

"In that case you had better run off," the woman said, in a huff.

Doubled up and holding his stomach, Vazir raced towards the woods....

On the way back home not a single lorry, not even a horse and cart overtook them. They had to walk all the way, but what with talking, time passed unnoticed and not one of them felt tired.

Gabdulla told them how boring it had been in the hospital.

"How happy I was to get that letter from Granny!" he recalled.

"I penned that," boasted Vazir.

"The handwriting was very good," Gabdulla declared with a sedate nod.

"The letter said that Granny Nagima would give you your father's medal to wear on your chest for a whole day," Aidar said.

"Yes, that's what the letter said," Gabdulla agreed, "and I am grateful to Granny. Only I shan't wear that medal," he added seriously.

"Why not? Why should you turn down such an honour as that?" the boys asked in surprise.

Gabdulla shook his head.

"The renown of the father cannot be inherited by the son and worn like a cap that was left to him. Not even for a single day! Renown is not a cap."

His companions said nothing for a while, but looked at their leader with respect. Having thought things over Aidar said:

"That may be so. All right, renown is not inherited, but a father's courage is passed on to his sons. Sharifulla himself said it was!"

"Yes, courage *is* inherited!" Vazir said with conviction, placing his hand over his heart.

"It certainly has been inherited by Gabdulla," Yakup stated enthusiastically.

"And that is the truth!" the other boys agreed with pride.

Gabdulla put his arms around his comrades' shoulders.

"Look at Kiramet over there!"

The four travellers came to a halt on top of a hillock. The sun was sinking and, like a mighty ball of fire, it was perched right on the tip of Peak Kiramet. Blazing in the rays of the sun the mountain looked like a volcano erupting scarlet, raging

flame. Delighted, the boys gazed at their beloved Kiramet. Aidar could not help bursting into song:

"Far away the bright rocks glow
On Kiramet, as white as snow.
Through the whole wide world they roam,
Seeing wonders far from home,
The brave djigit and his trusty steed!"

The other boys joined in the refrain.

Peak Kiramet lay ahead! Within how many days would the Tripod, now standing firmly on four supports, start out on the march to bring the mountain lake back to life? Remember that a real man, once he has set out on a journey, is never afraid of any difficulties he may meet and will not turn back until he has reached his goal. Nor shall the Tripod turn back, it will march on and attain, not only great heights, it will reach the loftiest pinnacle!

The years will pass. The boys will grow up and become *djigits*. They will reach ever new heights, far higher than Peak Kiramet. They will bring new life not to one lake alone. They will not only make the world we live in more beautiful, they will also make the whole universe more beautiful.

Do you believe they will? I do.

A WORD TO MY READERS

The time has come for me to leave my young friends from the mountain village of the Golden Eagle. On turning over the last page of this book, you, too, will have taken your leave of them. It is always sad to part with friends. That is why I am feeling a little sad. What about you?

Nothing much occurred in the book. The heroes stayed alive and well and nothing happened to them, except that Gabdulla was injured. Even then his wounds soon healed. My friends still have not had time to perform great deeds. They have brought renown neither to their village, nor to themselves. Still, something important *did* happen to them. During a few weeks in summer the boys did a lot of thinking and in many ways they changed for the better. They proved themselves ready to undertake great deeds. If the need arises they will undoubtedly perform those deeds.

By the way, talking of brave deeds. I do not believe that anyone undertakes to perform a brave act with forethought. Nobody says to himself: "Now I'm going to do something brave and I shall astonish people and gain renown."

A person gives all his strength to doing his duty to his country and his people, whether it be at work, or at war, and he does so without thought of himself. Heroism is not something to be sought after. It will appear by itself when heroic efforts are necessary. Courage is not needed only for heroic acts alone, or in special circumstances, not only in acts such as the feat of Alexander *Matrosov, when he threw himself in front of a German* machine-gun emplacement to save his comrades, or that of Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya, who fought in a partisan detachment against the nazi occupation forces. Courage is needed in what may seem, at first glance, ordinary, everyday affairs. I believe the most important thing is to have a stout heart and from one's earliest years to develop a strong character, to be honest and fearless in everyday life and actions.

I remember a case from life at the front during the war. At a small bridgehead on the river Dniestr in the spring of 1944 one of our artillery detachments under heavy fire was itself firing point-blank at attacking fascist tanks. Bullets were whistling all around and shells exploding. I happened to notice the loader of the gun-crew. He was loading the gun as calmly as if he were throwing logs into the fire at home. He was not thinking of brave deeds, nor of military renown. He was fully occupied with the job he was doing so confidently as an artilleryman. However, at the same time he *was* performing an act of heroism.

I have been wandering a little, but I have not forgotten my friends. Something also happened to me when I was writing this book. I came to love those lads and made friends with them. Very much so. And that means a lot.

I would be very happy indeed if you, too, were to make friends with them. I know that you should not ask people to be friends. Friendship arises in spite of oneself, of its own accord.

You might ask me: "Did they really climb Peak Kiramet and bring life to the lake there?" For my part I am absolutely sure that they did in fact do everything they had planned to do. Otherwise I would not have made friends with them. I do not

like boastful lazybones and idle dreamers. I would never have wasted a lot of paper and ink on that kind of people.

I like people who make plans that they can carry through and who do, in fact, carry through what they have planned.

Well, that is all for now. Until we meet again, my friends!

THE AUTHOR

REQUEST TO READERS

Progress Publishers would be glad to have your opinion of this book, its translation and design and any suggestions you may have for future publications.

Please send all your comments to 21, Zubovsky Boulevard, Moscow, USSR.

М. Карим.

ТАГАНОК.

Повесть.

На английском языке.

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